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PORTRAIT OF A CELIBATE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Loom of Youth
Roland Whately
Cardcastle
Kept
Love in These Days

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PORTRAIT

of a

CELIBATE

BY ALEC WAUGH

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For

RUTH MORRIS

A Birthday Present

August 15, 1928

PORTRAIT OF A CELIBATE

I

We were standing, John Harraway, the editor of *Contemporary Ideas*, and myself, in the lobby of the Granville Club when the tall, elegant, austere figure of James Merrick swung through the revolving doors.

"The very man," said Harraway. "Do you mind waiting for me half a second?"

Their conversation took place within a couple of feet of me.

"Such luck," said Harraway. "I was just going to write to you. And now I'm saved the trouble. I was wondering whether you'ld care to do an article on divorce for me. Something about the history of it; what the ideas of the first reformers were; what kind of opposition they were up against, showing how the law's changed. You know the kind of thing."

Merrick nodded his head. The subject of divorce was topical. A few days earlier the bill prohibiting the press report of divorce proceedings had been passed. And no man was better qualified to write such an article than Merrick. For twenty years he had been pleading the necessity for reform in articles and speeches to which his position as a solicitor had given an authority and weight denied to the most distinguished and

eloquent of laymen. His pale, thin cheeks flushed a little as he answered.

"I shall be delighted," he said, "and I am flattered that you should ask me. How soon would you require the article?"

"As soon as you can manage it. The subject's in the air."

"By Saturday."

"Splendid! And about two thousand words. I'm afraid I can't offer you as much as I should like, as much as the article will be worth . . ."

But Merrick had lifted a deprecatory hand.

"My dear sir," he said, "there are very few resolutions to which I can claim honestly to have been faithful. But to this I have: that I would never take a penny for such work as I have been able to do in the cause of easier divorce. Will you please send a check for whatever you think my article to be worth to the secretary of the Divorce Law Reform Union. I shall consider myself to be repaid amply by the pleasure and privilege of writing it."

It was in a way a pompous little speech, but spoken though it was in a dry, precise, carefully articulated voice, it was by no means without dignity. And it was with a perplexed but genuine admiration that Harraway watched the tall, sparse figure climb the stairway with long, even strides.

"An odd fellow," was his comment. "But a rather fine one."

Which showed perspicacity on Harraway's part.

For it was the oddness rather than the fineness that one was inclined to notice first. In my own case I know very well it was. But then in my own case it was under considerably less conventional circumstances that we had met; under indeed the unlikeliest of conditions, in the spring of 1918 and in the Offizier Kriegs-Gefangenen-Lager, Mainz.

★

We had been captured on the seventh day of the retreat within a few miles and a few hours of one another. We had reached Karlsruhe on the same day; and on the same day, a week later, we had been drafted to the citadel at Mainz. We did not, however, for six weeks get to know each other. There were six hundred other officers in the camp. He was a major, I was a lieutenant; and field officers, for the first few weeks, at any rate, of captivity, stayed more or less among themselves. I was not, indeed, more than vaguely conscious of his existence till he outraged contemporary opinion by blacklegging the camp wine boycott.

The details of the affair are these. In days when the mark was worth a shilling a particularly raw and sour wine was sold to us in the billiard room above the kitchen at fifteen marks a bottle. There was no other form of alcohol to be obtained, and in our more cheerless moments we were grateful, if not for the stuff's taste, at least for the warmth it stirred in us. For a month or so we accepted it for what it was in a land overfull of *Ersatz*.

And then the sentry who was responsible for the custody of the cellar confided to a British orderly that the wine for which we paid fifteen marks at the citadel was bought for three marks in the town; which fact was communicated by the orderly to the officer in charge of the room for whose cleanliness he was responsible. The officer reported it to the senior colonel in his block, and a committee sat upon the question. A profit of four hundred per cent. was agreed to be excessive; some profit, it was conceded, was legitimate. But four hundred per cent.!—no—that was too much! A deputation waited upon the German authorities. The wine, it was submitted, was beyond the restricted means of the members of the camp. The number of bottles consumed during the last week did not, the German authorities retorted, support this theory. These things were relative, the deputation answered. Perhaps if the wine cost less there would be more drunk. The German authorities doubted if this were possible. Anyway, it was not worth the risk. They were doing, it was suggested, a good line of business. They preferred, they regretted they must prefer, to leave things as they were.

The committee again sat. After two hours of deliberation the following resolution was approved. If the Germans were unprepared to accept a reasonable profit they must be denied all profit. There should be no wine drunk. Wine should be boycotted till the price was lowered. The details of this resolution were announced privately to the members of each room. The

camp went dry. For a fortnight it remained dry. Then there was a cold spell and the camp felt that dear wine was better than no wine at all. A deputation waited upon the deputation. Was anything being done about the boycott? The senior deputation waited upon the Germans. Did not the authorities think that a lowering of the price of wine would be to the advantage of the authorities? There seemed to have been less wine drunk during the last fortnight. Had there? was the authorities' bland retort. They had not noticed it. Again the deputation withdrew, and the camp was informed that their interests were not being overlooked. It was two days after the announcement of the deputation's failure that James Merrick became a blackleg.

I was in the billiard room at the time, waiting for a game to finish. It was half-past one, and there was no one else in the room besides the two players and the gunner subaltern who had been detailed to act as a piquet to protect the boycott. The cold spell had passed. The metallic heat of a German summer was beating down upon the parched and empty square. Most of the prisoners were in their rooms asleep. The German orderly was dozing against the stove. Some ducks were quacking in the courtyard below the window. I thought of Lords and the green peace of an English summer. Even the clicking of the billiard balls was muted.

And then James Merrick strolled into the room; it was not the first time that I had seen him, but it was the

first time that I had noticed him. He was tall and graceful, of his type good-looking, and in a curious way he gave an impression of being exceedingly well dressed. His tunic, as were the majority of our tunics in those early days before parcels had begun to arrive from England, was frayed and ragged. His breeches were patched haphazardly about the knee. His puttees were scratched and stained and punctured. And yet he was well dressed in the same way that Cinderella always seems to be well dressed as she sits in her rags before the kitchen fire; far better dressed indeed than when she is a shimmering sheet of silver. It may be that when a coat is new our eyes are attracted from the fine points of tailoring by the glow and colour of the cloth, so that it is only when a coat is old that we can tell whether it is well or badly cut. At any rate, James Merrick that day in his ragged and stained tunic appeared more strikingly well dressed than ever he has seemed since as I have watched him stroll negligently down Piccadilly, a graceful, supercilious figure, bending forward now and again to smile, and raise with a stiff and courtly sweep the gleaming surface of his hat.

Slowly he walked into the room towards the German orderly.

"I am thirsty," he announced. "I believe that you sell wine."

The bullet-shaped head was jerked forward into wakefulness.

"Eh, vat?" he said. It was the first time that anyone had spoken to him for sixteen days.

"I said," repeated Merrick, "that I was thirsty. I am informed that you sell wine."

There was a dead silence. The billiard players had turned from their game. The wine piquet was leaning forward anxiously on his stool. The German was staring stupidly at Merrick.

"Come, come," said Merrick impatiently. "Do you or do you not sell wine? And if you do, what manners of wine have you?"

"Only this, sir," and the German dived quickly down into the wooden case beside him and produced a long slim-necked bottle.

Merrick took the bottle from him, turned it over slowly in his hands, read the name on the label. "Liebfraumilch," he said, sniffed, raised the bottle to the light, then handed it again to the German. "It may be," he said, "how much?"

"Fifteen marks, sir."

Merrick counted out fifteen marks, waited for the bottle to be uncorked, then went and sat down at a table by the window from which he could be seen by anyone passing the west side of the square. The wine piquet looked dubiously at me.

"What shall I do?" he asked. He was a poor-looking creature. Had he been anything else he would not, I imagine, have been there at all.

"What are you supposed to do?" I said.

"Stop people drinking. But that chap's a major."

"Then I should go and find someone who can stop him," I suggested.

A slow smile of gratitude and relief spread upwards about his face. "Of course," he said, "of course. Thank you so much. I'll go at once."

We waited, the remainder of us, in that atmosphere of half-pleasant, half-unpleasant anticipation in which as small urchins in a fourth form day room we had awaited the arrival of the cane that had been ordered for the castigation of faults not ours.

While James Merrick sipped slowly and with apparent appreciation at the dull yellow fluid we strained our ears for the sound of feet on the stone-flagged stairway.

At last they came. And one glance at the dumpy little figure with a bright red face, a curling moustache, and a ludicrously tight-fitting tunic who strutted forward like a Bateman caricature told us that it was comedy and not drama that we were to witness. The senior officer whom the wine piquet had requisitioned was no doubt a highly effective instrument of justice in his own orderly room with the might of the Army Act behind him, but the present situation lay clearly beyond his tether.

Merrick raised his head from the table and smiled pleasantly as his brother officer came up to him.

"Good afternoon, Everard," he said, "may I persuade you to take a glass of wine with me?"

Major Everard shook his head. "No, no; thanks very much. It's very kind of you, Merrick. I'm quite well, though, thank you."

"Had I thought you to be anything else," laughed

Merrick, "I should not have been so tactless as to offer it you!"

His inquisitor blushed, coughed, and began to stammer. "I thought—I—I—I—imagined," he said, "that you—you must be ill yourself—or you would not have —would not have broken the—broken the confidence the camp had p-placed in you. I should not have thought unless you had been ill——"

"Now you know, Everard," said Merrick, "that you imagined nothing of the sort."

"Er—er——" the Major began to stammer.

"Of course you didn't," Merrick smiled. "It was only that you desired to be tactful. A desire that I commend in you. The whole affair is, however, exactly what it appears to be. Being thirsty, I felt the need of wine. A need that I have come here to gratify. You consider that to be very wrong of me and you have come to tell me so. That is how it stands, surely?"

Twenty-five years earlier, when he was a cadet at Sandhurst, youth and resilience might have supplied Major Everard with the requisite technique for such a moment. But he had lived too long in a world where things were so or were not so, where a rifle was either clean or dirty, where the word "please" was a command. He could not fence. He could only bluster.

"It's disgraceful," he said; "you, a senior officer, to set such an example. To let down the camp like this—a disgrace, sir, a disgrace."

Merrick smiled sadly at him.

"My good Everard," he said, "this boycott was

organized for the benefit of the camp, and it is not going to be affected by my breaking it alone and to the extent of a single bottle. Had I conducted some organized offensive you might with justice have felt aggrieved. But that I have not done. I could drink a bottle of wine here every day, and the Germans would still be running their cellars unprofitably. If more fellows follow my example it will mean merely that they, in company with myself, prefer dear wine to no wine at all. And if in time the majority of the camp should come to agree with me, then, as the boycott was organized for the camp's benefit, it will be better that the wine boycott should cease, for the camp will have ceased to consider such a thing to be in its interests. In the meantime the Germans will not lower the price of wine. You can be sure of that. They are obstinate creatures."

"Then we should be equally obstinate."

Merrick shook his head. "There is an old proverb, Everard, about cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. The pleasure that it would give me to annoy the Germans would be less than the discomfort my abstinence would cause me. Of two evils I must take the less. The rest of you may think differently. To me that is a consideration of minute importance. I rarely attempt to influence opinion: never, unless it appears to me to be hindering personal liberty. If the camp wants wine let it have it. If it does not want it let it do without. Myself, however, I do need it. I trust," he said, turning to me, "that you agree with me."

I murmured something that, had it been audible, would have been noncommittal.

Major Everard grunted angrily.

"What this young man thinks or does not think," he said, "is neither here nor there."

"Ah," said Merrick; paused; then added thoughtfully:

"You think that, do you? Well, perhaps you are right; in fact, I'm sure you are. It isn't. It is neither here nor there. We are laws unto ourselves: or should be. Personal liberty, that is all that matters. Still, if that is your attitude, Everard, you should allow an equal freedom to the rest of us. Yes?"

And he smiled cheerfully into the Major's face.

But the Major was defenceless, unarmed and weaponless. His face grew redder. The pouches beneath his eyelids twitched. He embarked on the first syllables of three sentences, each of which he abandoned with a grunt. "You will hear more of this," he said, and strutted from the room. Heavily and at irregular intervals his feet thudded on the stone stairway.

James Merrick sighed.

"It is curious," he said, "very curious how incapable the average person is of applying the laws of demand and supply to changed conditions. That dear old Major is convinced that because wine is sold at three marks in town it should be sold for five marks here. But it should be obvious to him that the demand for wine in this camp is far greater than it is in Mainz. In Mainz there are a number of competing inducements to ex-

travagance. In Mainz you may spend your money on dances, or theatres, or cinemas, or women. There is only a limited amount of money to be spent, and if the price of wine is unproportionately higher than the price of a stall, the money will go on stalls and not on wine. But here there is no competition. There is no dancing. There are no concerts. There are no theatres and, alas, I suspect for Major Everard, no women. Food and wine are the only targets for extravagance. The demand is greater here and so the price is higher.

"It is quite fair," he continued. "I do not grumble. And in a very short time the camp will realize that it must buy something with its money; that it must be entertained. The Germans know that, so they are waiting. Someone had to be the first to break this boycott, and I prefer to be the first rather than the fifth or seventh. The price of everything is fixed by supply and demand. For instance, I pay twice a week seventy-five marks to a German sentry for a loaf of bread."

I gasped at that. "Three pounds fifteen shillings for a loaf," I said. "It's robbery!"

"Not at all," he answered. "Money is no use to me when I can buy nothing with it. I spend, I suppose, in London, about a pound a day selfishly on my own amusements, which is just about what I am spending here on bread. You make the mistake that so many others make, that nearly every one, in fact, does make, of imagining that money has an absolute value. It has not. It is merely a medium of exchange. In London a pound is worth a lunch at the Savoy. In Paris a dinner

at the Crillon. In Palm Beach it will purchase you an ice-cream sundae. Here, as you see, it is worth about a quarter of a loaf of bread. I am a practical man. I take what I want for what I possess. And I cannot allow my liberty to be fettered by unenlightened prejudice. I have the right to be swindled if I choose."

He smiled, and rather charmingly, with one of those smiles that express an attitude rather than a mood; that come seemingly from mellowed distances.

"In the meantime," he added, "wine is one of the things that cannot be enjoyed alone. You had better help me. It is foul stuff. I shall never be able to finish it alone."

He was right: it was foul stuff. But by four o'clock there were three empty bottles on the table. And the bottle has made as many friendships as it has broken.

★

A community so heterogeneous as a prisoners of war camp divides itself of necessity into groups. There was the escaping club group and the theatrical group and the educational group. There were the people who drank and the people who prayed and the people who played bridge. There were, and they were vastly in the majority, the people who did nothing. While lastly there were ourselves, some eight or nine of us, who met day after day in an annex off the billiard room which we called the "alcove," to talk and write and idle, as the mood impelled us; some eight or nine of us united by a reluctance to be disturbed, an attitude to

our environment that was best defined, I think, by Merrick.

"Peace of mind, that's all I ask," he said. "The rest of them can organize escaping clubs to their hearts' content. They never will escape. For four years now people have been trying to, and no one has. If it amuses them to plan escapes, by all means let them. I am old and tired and an indifferent linguist. I have spent twenty-eight consecutive months between Nieuport and Péronne. My war is over. The Americans can carry on there now."

And so, while the rest of the camp busied itself elsewhere, we would sit through those long summer days, writing and chattering and drinking.

It was an odd kind of workshop, that annex off the billiard room. On one side, through the open windows, came the cackle and the smell of ducks. And on the other, from the larger room, the murmur of conversation and the click of billiard balls. While within the alcove itself it was never really quiet. The fact that one of us was at work upon a novel would not prevent the remaining six from discussing as loudly as they chose the psychology of Hamlet or the physiology of Queen Elizabeth.

"What do you think," someone would remark, "of this'll as a rhyme for whistle?"

To which would come the retort, "I've done eighteen hundred words since breakfast."

"I want a rhyme for porcelain," the librettist would announce.

There would be a pause. Then "Of course, Elaine" would be suggested.

Or else Merrick, who spent much of his time working out cross-country train journeys with the aid of a pre-war Bradshaw that had found its battered way into the camp library, would be wondering how long it would take to get across Bath in a taxi from the Great Western to the Midland Station.

"Ten minutes. Admirable," he would say. "Then it is just possible to lunch at Melksham and reach Shepton Mallet in time for tea."

A curious atmosphere. A curious time.

We used to talk much in those days of all that we would do, or rather, not so much of what we would do, as of how marvellous life would be for us when the war was over. For four years every minute that we had spent in London had been on leave, and every minute of it had been madly, deliriously happy. It was natural that we should conceive the return to civilian life as a glorified week-end leave. We did not see that return in terms of any specific pleasure. It was not that we should be able to enjoy this and dispense with that, but that we should be touching at every minute of the day that level of intense consciousness which we had during those last four years touched only on our leaves. For hours we would talk of it: that enchanted countryside of peace, and all of us in the same vaguely coloured anticipatory sense. All of us except Merrick. He was content enough with the present and unthrilled about the future. The days were passing: let them pass.

His position, of course, was different from that of the rest of us. He was older, in the middle forties; and he was returning, as the rest of us were not, to assured and established habits. He was senior partner in one of the oldest and most respected firms of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn. The work he had abandoned would be awaiting him. He would convey property, investigate titles, pacify litigants, file petitions. He would identify himself again with the cause of simplified divorce, the work which had made his name familiar outside the gray precincts of the law; a work to which, indeed, in quite large part the changing attitude of the general public towards divorce was due. He was a bachelor, and the green shutters would be unbarred before the windows of that tranquil house in that tranquillest of little squares which is in Knightsbridge to the south of Charles Street.

"It is a pleasant house," he said. "You must come and dine there with me when we get home. I have some quite nice things. And I cannot say how relieved I was to be in the position when war came of not being forced to let it. I loathe the idea of other people being among my things. It will be pleasant to get back to it."

Pleasant. It was a word that was very often on James Merrick's lips: a word that defined and expressed very accurately the modified excitement with which he looked out on life. It would be pleasant to be back in his own atmosphere, among his own things and his own acquaintances. Pleasant, but no more than that. Peace would not mean for him the opening of high

adventure, but the restoring of certain material amenities. Good food, good wine, warm fires, comfortable chairs, the agreeable interchange of views that comprises the sum of leisured conversation. It was these that he was missing.

Only once did I see him make the least show of feeling, and that was in connection with the one subject that was personal to him, the subject of divorce. I forget how the conversation turned that way. Out of some modern novel, probably. All that I can recall of it is the picture of a languid figure leaning back against the window and fluting in a languid, effeminate voice: "Must say that for myself I think it's rather dangerous to marry in the same spirit that our grandfathers went to Brighton for a week-end, looking on it all as a rather entertaining diversion with no responsibilities attached to it. Strict divorce may mean a few hard cases, but for the general good and that, I'm all for it. Believe in people paying for their mistakes, myself."

It is a vivid picture. The languid, effeminate voice; the sudden flashing of Merrick's face, the clenching of a fist, the sudden outburst, with the precise punctilious note gone utterly from a voice that anger had made real.

"Nonsense! You might just as well say that a man who's got venereal disease has no right to be cured of it—that he ought to be punished—that he ought to be made an object lesson!"

A wild and angry outburst. Followed a second later by a suave apology.

"You must pardon me," Merrick was saying. "I should never be permitted to speak in private about divorce. I have spoken in public so often that I always imagine that I am answering a heckler. And for the average heckler, well, bad manners have to be parried by bad manners."

But it was not that. It had been no associated memory that had caused that outburst. James Merrick had definitely lost his temper. One thing at least could move him.

It was the only thing that could, however. At all other times he was the detached materialist, the interested but unstirred spectator of the human comedy: making certain of the tangible things that were to be touched and seen. He was amusing and well informed; a sympathetic listener; as pleasant a companion as any exile has the right to wish for. But there were times when he depressed me. He was twenty-five years older than I was, twenty-five years further down the road that I was travelling. And I was afraid lest I too one day might see nothing left in life but the decoration as gracefully made as might be of the interval preceding one's extinction. Once, after all, he must have felt as I was feeling, once must have asked of life something that was not material; had asked, and, having failed to find it, had fallen back on the things of which he could be sure, the things which had then seemed to him unimportant. And I did not care to think that one day I might come to hold the same views of life that Merrick held. For they were deep-rooted. Of that

I was convinced. They were not merely the reaction against four years of discipline and discomfort. They were, I was very certain, more than that. Back somewhere in the past they had been built out of experience. And I would pause often in the intervals of my writing in the alcove to look curiously at him as he pored over the pages of his Bradshaw arranging imaginary week-ends, fantastic cross-country journeys from one end of England to the other, and always so arranging them that nowhere should a single meal be missed.

★

Odd days. So odd that it is difficult to believe that it is less than ten years ago that James Merrick and I were walking round the square at Mainz after dawdling the afternoons away in the alcove over sour hock; hard to believe that it is less than ten years ago that we were parading the town in the thrill of an unexpected freedom, sauntering into cinemas and cafés, and tipping waitresses amid protestations of astounded gratitude with penny packets of Sunlight soap. So odd, so distant, that they belong, those days, seemingly to another century, another world.

Little remains of them and that which does remain is that which at the time seemed least essential. How surprised I should have been had I been told ten years ago that more than anything it would be my friendship with James Merrick that would serve to remind me that those days were real: that that, where so much else had gone, would stay.

That it has done is not, however, in face of the facts, surprising. Most personal relationships are affairs of circumstances and habit. And whereas those other companions of the alcove with whom I had intrinsically more in common have drifted into other ways of life, to other towns and other countries, the associations of mutually held tastes and interests have year by year drawn Merrick and myself closer to one another.

We are members of the same club. And once or twice a month we sit next each other at dinner, and afterwards over coffee and old brandy pass an hour or so of desultory talk in the exchange of personal gossip and information that is not conversation, but is friendlier than conversation, and I will listen in indolent disagreement while he arraigns with a complete indifference the manners of a generation that no longer leaves cards at the houses where it has dined, that smokes cigarettes and occasionally even pipes in Piccadilly, that has discarded the silk hat on Sundays and has been seen to dine in a black tie in public.

He is my solicitor, and though I am not a profitable client, I acquired the habit during the weeks when I was negotiating for a bungalow in Sussex, and later when an injudicious essay brought me within danger of litigation, of dropping in to discuss the situation after lunch at the long bar counter of the First Avenue Hotel, where he has made a practice of lunching ever since he came as a young man to his offices in Lincoln's Inn. It was a pleasant habit, and I found myself con-

tinuing those visits after the need of them had ceased. So that usually once or twice a month I will saunter down there and seat myself on a high stool beside him, and eat dressed crab, while he makes his invariable lunch of two dozen oysters and a pint of stout.

And now and again he will invite me to his house—his small green-shuttered house in Trevor Square where each detail of ordered comfort is fastidiously set: where the temperature of every room and passage is gauged by a thermometer, where Merrick as he opens a door will never fail to cast a quick fussy look about the room to make sure that every vase is in its correct position, every picture at its right angle, every book dressed evenly along the white wood shelves.

We share also, and perhaps this is our greatest bond, a passion for cricket. And often during the summer he will ring me up round about four o'clock to suggest that we should spend a couple of hours at Lord's on the sun-drenched balcony of the pavilion.

And all that, over eight years, means the knotting of a good many ties.

A passion for cricket was, I said, the greatest bond between us. And certainly, had it not been for cricket, I should never have seen James Merrick as a figure in three dimensions. I should never have seen round him. He would have remained a flat figure; a caricature; a person whom I knew as one knows certain characters in Dickens by external idiosyncrasies: by little tricks and peculiarities. His fussiness about his home, his preoccupation about his comfort, his regard

for the observances of a demoded social code, his punctiliousness in dress and conversation; and as a humanizing touch the King Charles's head that is in all of us: that odd passion for divorce reform. All the essentials for caricature are there. And had it not been for our shared love of cricket there would never have arisen that occasion for confidence which showed him to me in relief; that marked the stages for me by which he had become the man he was.

It came, that occasion, unexpectedly; without any of the usual machinery that precedes a confidence. It was in winter time; one of the winters when an English cricket side was touring not too gloriously in Australia, and from my high stool at the bar counter of the First Avenue Hotel I was lamenting our lack of reliable information as to what was really happening.

"We get telegraphed reports," I said, "but what do they amount to? What do they really tell us? No more than the facts. No more than communiqués did in the war. What wouldn't one give for the sort of report that one gets in the *Times* of an average county match. I'ld give a lot," I added, "to know what they really think about our batting."

"Well, I can tell you that," said Merrick. "They're only afraid of Hobbs and Sutcliffe. And not very frightened of Sutcliffe after Hobbs is out."

"How do you know that?"

"From the Australian papers."

"You get them sent to you?"

"I have friends who send me them."

"I envy you!"

"They are there for you to borrow."

I took him at his word. After lunch I went back with him to his office: a pleasant room on the third floor looking out onto the grass and trees of Lincoln's Inn. It was in Stone Buildings, and often when I had been in training with the Inns of Court during the early months of the war I had looked up wistfully at the long low block whose gray stone and calm proportions symbolized a world of ease and leisure that had passed very possibly forever; whose passage was symbolized by the yellow waste of mud into which the feet of drilling men had churned the ordered lawn past which generations of wigged barristers had hurried on their way to court.

"How little I thought then," I said, "that I should ever stand in one of these windows looking down on a green lawn and a quiet square!"

Merrick had no reply. He was standing at his desk, holding in his hand the large roll of a pink newspaper that must have come in by a midday mail to be delivered in his absence.

"The new number of the *Australasian*," he said; and his voice had gone curiously soft, losing its precise affected note; and his eyes as they looked at the paper wrapper were vague and dreamy; and though he made no reply to my remark it may have been that its evocation of the past had started a train of thought.

"How little one's handwriting alters," he said at last. "It's odd, that, you know. Twenty-five years. A

long time. The quarter of a century. In twenty-five years one passes out of youth into middle age. Perhaps we wouldn't even recognize, were we to meet them now, the people we haven't seen for all that while. There would be so much gone: the gold in the hair, the silver in the voice. And yet the handwriting upon an envelope: that doesn't alter; that's the same, whatever else is changing. It's odd, isn't it? that that should be the one thing to last, the one thing that you can recognize after twenty years. The handwriting upon a wrapper."

And I, who now know his story, can well imagine how at that moment his thoughts were travelling backwards to that spring day twenty-five years earlier when the fingers that addressed that wrapper had turned for the first time the handle of that office door.

II

I HAVE never seen a photograph of James Merrick as he was in early manhood, nor have I met anyone who knew him intimately in those days; but from what he has become and from what he has told me I can picture him clearly enough as he was then. He would have been twenty-seven years old; four years down from Magdalen; with a flat in Air Street, work in his father's office as a salaried partner that filled his time without exhausting his energies on a yearly salary, which his friends insisted not quite justly on describing as an allowance, of five hundred a year; a large number of friends, an honest array of debts; a bedroom mantelpiece crowded with invitation cards. The typical young man of fashion, the Balzacian young man, the type of young man that Rastignac might not exactly have wished to be, but would have been content to be. And life for such a one was enviable enough in the early days of the century.

No war had come to shatter his belief in the divine right of privilege. There were no general strikes; no menacing roll of tumbrils. Socialism was an amusing game, like metaphysics, bearing no practical relation to real affairs. Surtax and capital levies could not have

figured in the wildest election programme. The world was a well-ordered place. And Merrick was grateful to the kindly providence that had placed him among those for whom its several excellences seemed to have been particularly designed. It was with a happy swagger that on Sunday mornings he would stroll between the green seats of the Park, bowing low to an acquaintance, pausing to chat a moment with a friend; and it was in a mood of comfortable well-being that he would seat himself at his father's table before the traditional trencher of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding that would be followed by apple tart and the Stilton for which he had assisted before lunch in the decanting of an admirably mellow port. And afterward there would be the succession of calls; for in the observance of his social duties Merrick would be modishly punctilious, being a wise young man and knowing that the "shooting" of cards is a valuable prelude to a second invitation, and that ten boring minutes are no heavy price to pay for dances and theatre tickets and drives to Hurlingham.

And I can picture him when the round is finished at six or half-past six sauntering home eastwards to the narrow street which the expanding demands of capital has now demolished; I can picture him mounting the rickety wooden stairs to the little fourth-story flat, with its narrow hall and narrow bedroom and its gabled living room. A cosily cushioned, deeply carpeted little room, with bookshelves running around it; and upon the elaborately papered walls, for these days

were lit still by the fading light of the Morris movement, are one or two framed prints of Beardsley drawings, and over the mantelpiece between the two brass candlesticks there is an enlarged photograph of a cricket group, taken during Merrick's last year when he was captain, and over its corner he has hung, in continuance of a school custom, the blue and yellow cap of the first eleven. And I can picture him glancing slowly round the room, at the books, the pictures, the furniture, the ornaments, with a contented smile. The world is a good place. And he lifts his arms in a lazily happy languor, as though he were lifting some load or other from his shoulders. As, indeed, in a way, he is. For the formalities of the day are over, and his evening clothes have been laid upon his bed, and it is among men, young men of his own age and set, that he will be dining, and it is in localities the reverse of formal that there is every possibility of the evening ending. And as the water splashes into his bath, as he watches the crystal salts dissolve and cloud the steaming water, as he slides back into those scented depths, letting his head sink backward, so that the water rises over his hair on to his forehead, he muses pleasantly on the varied and agreeable hazardings of life.

And he is very worldly about it all. For the young man of fashion has passed beyond the capacities of surprise. He is not disenchanted, for the human comedy is an engrossing spectacle. But he has exhausted Life and its Experiences, and when the young man of fashion talks about experience and life with a big E

and a big L, he does not mean that he has been chased by Dyak head hunters in Sarawak, or been shipwrecked on a Paumotus atoll; he means something quite other and much simpler than that. To such a one life and experience mean one thing only. And James Merrick has explored this woman business so that when he glanced at the row of cards along the crowded mantelpiece it was certainly with a sense of anticipation, with a foreknowledge of possible adventure, but with a sense of anticipation very similar to that with which he went out onto the cricket field to bat. He might make fifty, he might make a duck. But he had made fifties and he had made ducks before, had made plenty of them. There was nothing particularly novel about either. James Merrick conformed very adequately to type.

No, it is not difficult to imagine what manner of man it was that on an afternoon of middle spring, in the early days of the Twentieth Century, strolled, swinging his stick with the mental and physical exhilaration that follows two dozen oysters and a pint of stout, from the First Avenue Hotel, down Chancery Lane to Lincoln's Inn Fields. A handsome, well-groomed, admirably tailored man, admirably well pleased with himself and the world he lives in, arrogant and generous and vain and open-hearted, with no suspicion that the remainder of his life will not resemble in every delightful detail the steady flow of days that have brought him to this contented garden: little suspecting that it is for the last time that that

particular person will be turning out of Chancery Lane through the iron gate into Stone Buildings; little suspecting that it will be somebody quite other with another present, another future, another past, who will be swinging through them on the next and following days: the next and following months and years; little suspecting that for that particular young man the sands of that particular fortune have run dry.

Little suspecting. He had had no warning clue. How was he to guess that that card jutting out of an envelope bore a date to which all his life he would turn back as to a landmark. It had been so very ordinary a letter. Just a note of introduction from a friend.

My Dear Merrick [it had run]:

Some time during the course of the day you will receive a visit from Mrs. Herbert Eagar, who has asked my advice about a solicitor. She is in some sort of personal trouble and was in a high state of panic. I could not gather quite what it was all about: you know, my dear Merrick, what women are. And anyhow, I felt that yours was the right sort of brain to disentangle matters of this sort. So I gave her a note to you. You'll be nice to her, won't you? And you should be grateful to me, for I imagine that I've put at least six and eightpence in your pocket ! ! !

The name of Mrs. Herbert Eagar had conveyed nothing to Merrick, and when some two hours later a clerk had brought up a further letter of introduction, he had seen no reason why he should telescope a num-

ber of quite important interviews to see her immediately. It was probably some quite trivial matter, which she would take a vast number of minutes explaining to him, and in all probability her time was of no value to her.

"Is she waiting downstairs?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Then you might tell her, will you, that I'm most fearfully sorry, but I'm terribly busy all the morning with appointments right up to lunch. Ask her if she could manage to come round afterwards."

In a couple of minutes the boy was back.

"Mrs. Eagar says that if half-past two would be all right for you, sir, may she come back then?"

Merrick nodded his head. "Tell her that'll do splendidly, and explain to her, won't you," he added, "how really sorry I am not to be able to see her now."

But even as he spoke a client was being brought into the room; in two minutes he was immersed deeply and unromantically in matters of conveyance. And long before lunch time came Mrs. Herbert Eagar had become part of his routine. So much so, indeed, that when the boy came up to announce that she had arrived he could not think for the moment who she was.

"Ah, yes," he said, "I remember. Show her up."

He experienced not the slightest tremor of anticipation as he heard the flutter of her footsteps on the stairs. He could not have been more unprepared for the sight in the doorway of a familiar figure, for a sudden gasp of astonishment, a pause, and then a ripple

of laughter, and a merrily cried "Why, but of all the people in the world that it should be you!" There had been nothing in the note or in the name to associate his prospective client with the bright-eyed, fair-haired, lightly laughing girl who, on a night of revelry and tinkled glasses, had been introduced to him boisterously as Marian.

"Y-you!" was all that he could stammer. "Y-you!" Stammered it on a note of nervous alarm that accorded ill with that manner of unperturbed detachment that is proper to the man who has explored experience and is beyond the boundaries of surprise. As indeed the whole incident with which this unexpected visitor was associated accorded ill with that knowledge of men and women, that sense of fitness and proportion on which every well-equipped young man prides himself. It was an incident which for three months James Merrick had been unsuccessfully endeavouring to forget. For it was at a party for which no other generic label than Bohemian exists that he had met Marian Eagar, and he had made the kind of mistake with regard to her that in that atmosphere young gentlemen out of another world are fatally inclined to make.

★

It was a mistake, however, that other and more experienced men might have well made. Merrick had been told that it was going to be "that kind of party."

"It'll be a really good show," the friend who had brought a third-hand invitation had said to him. "I've

never been to the place myself, but I'm told it's one of the jolliest houses to have a party at in London. It's bound to be pretty gay. They'd thought of making a dressing-gown and pajama party of it, so you can guess what it'll be like from that. And they only decided not to because they said that one associated pajamas too much with sleep and not enough with ragging, and that if people put on pajamas and lolled about on cushions after midnight they were certain to start feeling drowsy. Pajamas, they said, should come at the end not at the beginning of a party. So we ought to enjoy ourselves pretty thoroughly. Don't get there before twelve."

He had been told it was to be that kind of party. And it looked as though it were that kind of party. There was a scented, exotic, cushioned atmosphere about the discreet, creeper-covered house in the quiet square at whose front door the cab deposited him. A friendly, intimate, reassuring, and at the same time exciting sense of warmth had swept to meet him as the front door swung open and he saw beyond the butler's shoulders a wide, thick-carpeted staircase curving upwards towards the sound of music. The hall was brightly but softly lighted; the dull gold wall paper shone dimly like the panels of some gentle furnace that exuded a gentle heat. His footsteps made no sound on the deep pile carpet. At the turn of the stairs there was a shadowed passage, a passage or perhaps an alcove; he could not tell. And though the party was centred between the two main rooms of the front

floor, in the larger of which there were music and dancing, and in the smaller a large buffet table piled high with sandwiches, tomato and *foie gras* and caviare; with fruit salads and cold pies, with a large ham and a basket of hard-boiled eggs; with variously coloured jugs of claret and hock and cider cup; with beneath the table a long trough of ice in which an array of champagne bottles were laid out side by side: though the majority of the guests were divided between these rooms there seemed to be a constant overflow of trios and couples and quartettes wandering up and down stairs to and from the upper reaches of the house.

"Please don't imagine," his hostess assured him, "that there's only a party going on down here; there's all the noise and dancing here, but you won't want to be dancing and rowing all the time; there are a couple of sitting rooms upstairs, and there's quite a nice flat roof that you can wander about on if it's not too cold. Just wander about and amuse yourself. It won't be a large party, not more than forty, so there'll be plenty of room for everyone."

She smiled gaily, and there was a glitter and a meaning in her smile; and though the glitter and meaning might well have sprung from an innocent mingling of the exhilaration of champagne with the exhilaration of being a hostess—both heady potions—Merrick, whose experience of Bohemia was very slight, who divided society into two halves, the disreputable and the respectable, who assumed that the woman who was generous in her affections was promiscuous in them,

too, interpreted in his own fashion that glitter and that meaning. This, he thought, was going to be a party. And I mustn't, he added, spoil it for myself by being rash. For as is proper to one who has mastered the technique of gallantry, James Merrick had a distrust of haste. He knew that there were many hours in front of him. And so, instead of precipitating himself upon any adventurous quest, he strolled into the smaller room, poured himself out a glass of Monopole, and leaning against the corner of the wall took stock of the position.

It was very much as he had expected. There was a great deal of noise and a great deal of chatter. There was a bandying of Christian names, a hailing of acquaintances across the room; there were men leaning on each other's shoulders and men standing with their arms around women's waists, and on the sofa beside the fire there was a couple holding hands; there seemed to be a good deal being drunk, and the party was scarcely an hour old.

With a contented smile upon his lips James Merrick leant back and watched it all. He did not know a great many of the people there—not more than two or three, in fact. But he knew that he would find no difficulty in attaching himself to any of the fluid groups that shifted at hazard from room to room. He had no wish, however, to commit himself too soon. He had always remembered and put to profit the advice given by an older friend on the eve of a long ocean cruise.

"Never," he had been told, "embark on a flirtation

till the third day out. Give people time to sort themselves, have a look round, and what is more important, give people time to think about you and wonder who you are and what you're like. Don't be precipitate."

It was advice that he had acted on very profitably during his visits to London's less advertised resorts; and he was not now going to waste his time and enterprise on someone who had already made other arrangements for the conclusion of the evening. There were a number of attractive women in the room, but there was plenty of time ahead; he could wait, and he could look round a bit, and he felt no embarrassment at standing by himself alone. He had sufficient self-confidence and sufficient poise to feel that the impression he would be making would not be, "There's a poor chap standing by himself because no one will talk to him"; but, "There's a fellow alone of his own choice because he doesn't see anyone in the room worth talking to." And whether or not that actually was the impression that Merrick made, it is the impression that we think we give that decides our conduct: so he drank his drink and munched a sandwich and waited patiently.

Nor had he to wait long for his patience to be rewarded.

Suddenly, above the murmuring ebb and flow of talk there rose a rather husky but gay and not unmusical, a friendly, welcoming, appealing voice.

"Gerry, my sweet," it cried, "oh, what a heavenly surprise!"

And a small figure, neat and vibrant, had run into the room, had flung a white arm about the neck of a young, well-dressed, theatrical-looking man and kissed him on the mouth.

"Such a surprise, such a heavenly surprise!" she cried. "I was feeling so lost. I came here with Barry Terrance; and before we'd been here three minutes in came May Santon, and of course he deserted me, and I suppose if Gladys is here you'll be treating me just the same."

"Marian, my dear," the man expostulated.

"Oh, yes, you will. The moment you see Gladys you stop seeing anybody else. Which is very nice and pretty for you both, but distressing for your friends. Anyhow, for a few minutes you can see that I'm fed and warmed."

And taking him by the arm she had led him away from his group towards the table.

With charmed senses James Merrick watched. She was all things that one wishes for one's chosen of Bohemian revelry. She was gay and pretty; wilful and young and sweet. And her lips, which were very red, were always laughing, and her hands, which were small and compact and practical, kept fluttering to rearrange the red-brown hair that was piled in a high waved mass upon her forehead. And her shoulders were very white above the brocaded bodice of her frock. And beneath the bell-shaped skirt, a gold-shod foot shot jauntily. And the odd, half-husky, half-squeaky voice was oddly musical. And "Thank heav-

en I came this evening," Merrick thought. "And thank heaven," he added, "I had the sense to wait!"

For he had learnt a good deal in those few minutes; had learnt that this girl who was called Marian knew very few people at the party, that her escort had other occupation, as had the Gerry she had welcomed so affectionately. She was, that was to say, momentarily unattached, and he could not believe that a girl who kissed so readily in public would be unapproachable.

He moved up to the table.

"I should strongly recommend you," he said as her hand hovered dubiously between two piles of sandwiches, "to try one of those caviared rolls instead."

His manner was light and friendly, and he smiled pleasantly, and there was neither embarrassment nor familiarity in his attitude; nothing in his smile or in his voice to make her feel ill at ease. And she smiled back at him with an equal friendliness.

"That's very kind of you," she said. "I'll try." And a second later: "How very right you were!" And he laughed and, "Don't you think it would be very much better accompanied by champagne?" he said. And he sought for a fresh bottle beneath the table. "Though I'm afraid," he added as he unwrapped the gold foil, "that it'll be too cold to be much good. That's the mistake people will make about champagne. They leave it in a basket of ice for hours, till you can't taste the wine and get no more than a prickling sensation of frozen alcohol."

"I think you must know a great deal about the

pleasures of the table," was her retort. "I think one day soon I shall have to invite myself to dine with you." And she smiled entrancingly, and they found themselves talking freely and easily as though they had known each other for a lifetime.

And when they danced it was as though they had been dance partners since childhood. She was light, exquisitely so, but not so light as to give him the disenchanting impression of dancing by himself. All the time he was conscious of her in his arms; as the music stopped he felt that he had never waltzed before.

"That was heavenly," he said. "We must have another before the end." For as a student of the technique of gallantry he knew that it would be a mistake to monopolize her company at the beginning of the evening. He had made his entrance, achieved his effect. He would leave her now among her friends, and later, when those friends had begun to weary her, he would return and they would dance together, and it would be growing late and there would be a subsidence of noise, and there would be less and quieter dancing; there would be an end of general talking, and couples would be drifting towards cushioned alcoves, to the shadowed passages and the rooms above. For James Merrick was convinced that it was that sort of party; which very possibly it was. At any rate, he acted on that assumption.

Not quite whole-heartedly, however. For as he danced and drank and flirted among the others during the hour or so that he thought it would be prudent

to let elapse before he began to search for Marian, his emotions were not altogether those of the detached, accomplished, slightly indifferent man of pleasure on the brink of an agreeably diverting but by no means novel or nerve-shattering experience. He felt instead a rather boyish, jollyish elation at having found a friend; a person who talked the same language and laughed at the same things. "She is really frightful fun," he told himself. And although the other women he danced and drank and flirted with were lithe and lively and provocative, admirably calculated to disturb the most solemn equanimity, it was without having formed any plans for future meetings, without a single date booked in his pocket diary, that he returned to search for Marian.

It was close on three o'clock by the time he found her. And by then the gaiety of the party had begun to flag. The interval between the dances had grown long. No one had the energy any longer to strum a piano, and though a gramophone was revolving a wheezy waltz, James Merrick felt in no particular mood for dancing.

"It's tragic," he said. "I've been looking forward to dancing with you all the evening, and now that the time's come I'm sure that we're both much too tired."

She admitted that it was tragic; admitted it with an enchanting smile. But what, she asked, was to be done about it?

"There's a very comfortable-looking sofa over there."

It was comfortable; wide and low, so that you had to lift your feet right up on it with masses of cushions piled behind you; and as you sat there talking it was only natural, since it was so much more comfortable, for an arm to be about a waist, for a head to sink upon a shoulder, for fingers to intertwine. And they talked in the desultory, contented fashion whose essence is not to be conveyed by any direct transcription. They said nothing that was at all witty or profound or even personal. But words are no more than channels, and down those casual channels, those comments on theatres and books and restaurants, was passing second by second a deliciously intimate sense of harmony, the knowledge of a liking and being liked, of being with a person with whom it was unnecessary to be upon one's guard, with whom one could show one's hand. "Here's someone that I can be really friends with," Merrick thought.

So happily, so drowsily contented was he, that when at last she raised herself upon her elbow to murmur with a sleepy smile that really she must be going home, and his offer to see her back had been accepted, and a blear-eyed butler had whistled up a decayed four-wheeler, it was with no little shock that he realized that the time had come for him to be enterprising and audacious. For he was in no mood for audacity and enterprise. He would have preferred infinitely to drive home quietly through the empty lamplit streets, lulled by the slow jolting of the cab; her hand in his, her head upon his shoulder, her hair and the soft fra-

grance of her hair against his cheek, talking or not talking as the mood pleased them. He would have much preferred to drive home like that, parting upon a promise to meet again, exchanging perhaps one of those calm kisses that may possibly at some later day be remembered as a prelude to the growth of passion; but express at the actual moment of their giving no more than friendship and affection. That is what he would have preferred. But the manual of a young man's deportment counselled him against such craven indolence. Women despised the men who did not take advantage of their opportunities. They took care not to give a second chance to the men who had let one pass. It was audacity that was expected of him. Besides, it was his address, not hers, that he had given to the cabman.

And so, resolutely, rather than impulsively, he turned towards her and with his arm cast ardently about her shoulders, "Darling," he said, "if only you knew how I've been waiting for this moment, how I've been longing to get away from all those people, to be alone with you! It's been so marvellous meeting you, so more than marvellous. If you know how desperately I have been longing for this moment!"

He spoke rapidly, with an eager emphasis of phrasing, and as he spoke his arm tightened about her shoulder, but even to himself his outburst did not sound particularly convincing. And with so complete a lack of encouragement was it met that he did not know how he could continue his speech through the series

of avowals that must precede his climax. There was upon him that chill misgiving which the lecturer knows when he realizes ten minutes from his lecture's start that his audience is not with him, and that because he has the secretary's check in his breast pocket he is forced to remain in this unwelcome company for another fifty minutes. "Shall I ever get to the end?" he asks himself. And Merrick began to stammer and repeat his phrases and forget his verbs.

In chill, inexpressive silence Marian listened, till a pause that became longer than a pause gave her safe grounds for assuming that the stream of oratory had run dry.

"Now that was very jolly," she said lightly, "and it was very nice of you to have bothered to tell it me, but I'm extremely sleepy and I can't help feeling that the cab's going in the wrong direction. Do be a dear and see if he's got my address right."

They did not speak another word on the journey back. And for three months Merrick had tried unavailingly to forget the incident. The accustomed remedies had proved singularly ineffective. He had sought comfort in the smoking-room story of the non-dancing man whose successes compensated him for his rebuffs. Those kick and rush tactics could not always come off, he had told himself. He had reminded himself of the number of occasions on which such evenings had concluded satisfactorily. But the medicine had not taken. The fact remained that he had been guilty of an unpardonable solecism. And it was no use

to assure himself that it was a mistake that anyone might have made, that it had come at the end of a party to which he had every reason, every encouragement, for believing that Marian had been a wisely invited guest. It was useless for him to pretend that he had made himself anything but supremely ridiculous. Nor could he excuse himself on the ground of being drunk. He had been quite sober.

It was not only his vanity, however, that had been hurt. For that wound he could have found ready balm, found it in the assuagement of some such facile conquest as always lies more or less to hand for a young man in a large city. If it had been merely a matter of making a mistake about a woman he could have got over it speedily enough. But it was more than that: it had been a matter of making a mistake not about a woman but about Marian. And that was different. He did not want to appear to Marian in that kind of way. Whenever he thought the matter over, whenever he tried to argue himself into a less unsatisfactory position, he returned always to the same conclusion. "The trouble about the whole thing is," he would say, "that I really liked the girl." Would say it with a heavy and growing sense of loss. They might have meant much to one another. They might have been friends even if they had not been lovers. And friendship was a rarer thing than one supposed. There were not so very many people with whom one could be one's self.

It was not surprising that when the door opened

upon Marian Eagar he should have been unable to do more than stammer stupidly:

"You—you, y-you!"

★

Marian Eagar made no sign of embarrassment. She came forward into the room with a merry laugh and her hand held out to him in friendliest greeting.

"If this isn't," she said, "the oddest thing that ever was!"

And James Merrick, in spite of the unfortunate scene that they had shared, had once again that oddly delightful feeling of being utterly in harmony with her. They understood each other far too well, he felt, to let even so serious a misunderstanding come between them.

"I hadn't," she went on, "the foggiest idea that it was you that I was going to see."

"And I'd only heard you spoken of as Marian."

"The oddest thing. And you'll think it odder still when you have heard what it is I've come to see you over. You won't ever guess. I've come to ask you about a divorce."

"A divorce!"

At the look of blank astonishment on his face she burst out laughing.

"I suppose," she said, "you didn't even know that I was married."

"We-well!"

"No, of course you didn't. How were you to know? Even the people who've known me all my life don't

believe I am. I've never altogether believed I was myself. It's never been quite real to me. At any rate, it's over now. At least, I suppose it is. Everyone says that it's perfectly easy to get divorces nowadays. It is, isn't it?"

And she paused breathlessly, smiling up at him from beneath the wide brim of a velvet claret-coloured hat.

"It is easy, isn't it?" she repeated.

"Now and again," he told her.

"Anyway, enough of one's friends seem to find it so!"

"Hadn't you better tell me all about it?"

She began; and it was a garbled narrative, an affair of comment and repetition, an explaining of motives and states of mind from which gradually the one necessary fact emerged: the fact that she was convinced of her husband's infidelity and that she had proof of her conviction in a letter that she had found in the pocket of his coat.

"Please don't imagine that I was spying," she insisted. "I wasn't. I was going through the clothes to see which ones could be given away and which only needed sending to the cleaners; and I was going through the pockets—naturally, one would; and when I came across a letter, naturally, I had to look at it to see if it was important, to see if it could be thrown away. And when I had read it, well, I just packed up my things and went straight out of the house and took a suite at Garland's; which was the one thing I could do, don't you think?"

"Perhaps," said Merrick, "I'd better see the letter first."

The letter was clear enough.

DARLING [the letter ran]:

Last week was marvellous. Those three days and nights; the being utterly together. They were so lovely I can hardly believe they happened. And I'm just counting the hours to when we can be again together. Oh, my dear, when can we? I saw a perfectly heavenly Poiret model yesterday. You'll love me in it. And there was a gem of an evening frock I simply couldn't resist. You aren't angry with me?

Your
MADGE.

Its implications were clear enough. And while Merrick read it through, the swift flow of Marian's talk continued:

"There's only one thing that letter can mean," she said, "and it finished me. I'd stood it as long as I could. I'd known all along really that it couldn't last —after the first month or so, that's to say. We had nothing in common; nothing really. I was a child when I married him. I didn't know my mind. I didn't know myself. I realized almost at once it was going to be a failure. I saw that we were drifting apart. But I did my best, really I did. I knew it couldn't last, sooner or later the smash was bound to come, but I swore that it shouldn't be through me it came. So I just hung on. As long as he really needed me, I thought, it was

my duty to stay, and then when I saw that letter, well, it's pretty clear, isn't it?"

"It's clear enough."

"No judge would have any doubt about it?"

"I shouldn't think so. The letter's dated. I suppose your husband was away that week?"

"For four days. He told me he'd gone to Liverpool. He's in shipping, with the Armitage people, and he has to go up for board meetings now and then."

"Did he tell you where he would be staying?"

"He nearly always stays at the Grand Central."

"Well, we can see if he was there those three days, and I expect we could find out from the Armitage people if he was up there at that time. He probably wasn't. And that should settle it."

"Then that's everything?"

"How do you mean, that's everything?"

"Well, don't I just sit down now and wait six months for a decree *nisi*? And then another six for a decree absolute?"

It was with a kind smile that James Merrick shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," he said.

"Not?"

"Unless your husband, that is to say, makes things easy for you! Have you said anything to him about it?"

"I haven't seen him since I saw that letter. I hadn't imagined that he had any say in the matter."

"I'm afraid he has. It's one of the anomalies of the divorce law in this country that, although the law is

intended to prevent a divorce by mutual consent, it is extremely difficult to get a divorce unless both parties are agreeable. Does your husband want to be divorced?"

"I don't know, I—well, I mean, he's never said so. But even if he doesn't, what does it matter? I've got that letter."

"That letter's not enough."

"Not enough!"

"In England, at the present moment, a woman needs two counts before she can divorce her husband. And infidelity is only one. The other one is usually desertion. And because desertion and infidelity amount to the same thing ordinarily when it's a case of a marriage breaking, and because infidelity on a woman's side is sufficient cause, women tend to imagine that they have only to find their husbands carrying on with some other woman to get free from them; but in point of fact that isn't so. So far your husband hasn't done anything to be divorced for. Do you know the woman, by the way?"

Marian Eagar shook her head. "I don't know; the name and the writing are unfamiliar."

Merrick pursed his lips. "Then she's not one of your mutual friends. He's not met her in any environment that he goes to in your company. Probably that means he's met her in the sort of world that men frequent among themselves. And from that and from the handwriting and from the actual letter, I can't help feeling that this Madge is the kind of woman that a man

might be very welling to spend a week-end with but would be sorry to have as a life's companion. If your husband is tied up with that kind of woman, I rather imagine that a divorce is about the last thing he'd be in a hurry for."

"In which case," he concluded, "you'll have to find some count other than desertion."

An unhappy and puzzled look came into Marian's face.

"What other counts are there?" she asked.

"There's cruelty."

She made no reply, just leant back rocking herself slowly in her chair, her hands that were enclosed, for the day was cold, in a small chinchilla muff, were lifted against her cheek.

"It's going to be harder than I thought," she said at length.

"That, I'm afraid, is what one usually does find when one goes to law. As you've never discussed the question with your husband you can't tell, I suppose, whether he really wants his freedom."

She shook her head. "I don't think he does," she said. "Not yet, anyhow. In his way, well, I suppose he rather likes me."

"And cruelty?"

For a moment she made no reply, her cheek was rested against her muff, and her eyes, which had grown solemn, were distant looking.

"Cruelty?" she repeated. "Cruelty? I don't know. I've been difficult, I suppose, in lots of ways. I'm

twelve years younger than he is. It was unfair of me to marry him. I dare say on the whole he's been pretty good, pretty patient. I don't know that I've really anything to complain of."

She spoke slowly, dubiously, and Merrick could see that she was keeping something back.

"Has he ever been cruel to you, though?" he asked.

Again she hesitated.

"On the whole," she said at length, "he's been pretty lenient."

"But there've been occasions."

She nodded her head slowly.

"Has he ever struck you?"

Again she nodded; more slowly, though, this time, and more reluctantly.

"In public?"

"At a party."

"There were people there whom you'd remember as being there—witnesses you could call?"

"Yes."

It was his turn now to hesitate. The gay, careless girl who had come laughing into his room had been changed into a worried, harassed, uncertain woman. That was the way things always were in his profession. People came cheerfully into his office, as though it were a shop in which verdicts and decrees were to be had for purchase. And they were angry and disappointed because they could not get them. Usually he found it hard to tolerate the ignorance and arrogance of the average layman. There were occasions, however,

when the whole traffic of legality became repugnant to him. When he longed to be able to say, "Yes, that's justice; you ought to have it. Here's your freedom." Just once in a while he felt that way, and he would have given anything to have been able to say that to Marian Eagar now. The inevitable cross-examination was repulsive to him.

"I hate," he said, "having to ask you all these questions. But I must, you know, if I'm to take up this case for you. Where did he hit you, in the face?"

"Yes."

"With his fist?"

"With his open hand."

"Was it serious, did it have any effect, was it very painful?"

Again she hesitated.

"It was infinitely humiliating," she said; said it so quietly that Merrick felt that to question her any further would be needless cruelty. It was obviously painful for her to have to discuss the subject. And he could get all the details he required from the witnesses.

"Suppose," he said, "you were to give me the name or names of the people that you'd like to have called as witnesses. And then I'll get in touch with them and have a chat, and I needn't bother you again till we've got your case pretty well cut and dried."

But still she hesitated.

"Has one really got to drag all that out into the light?" she said. "It seems rather a grubby business."

Merrick shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid one can't help that. The divorce law is based, you see, on a theory of punishment. There's assumed to be an innocent and a guilty party, and you must prove guilt."

She smiled a little wistfully.

"It seems all rather a pity," she said. Then, stretching out her hand, she took a penholder from his desk and a sheet of paper and began to write an address on it.

"If you write to him at once," she said, "I'll write by to-night's post, so that he'll get both of our letters to-morrow and know that it's all right. Here you are."

And she handed the sheet over to him.

He glanced casually at the address. Oswald McMurtrie, 13B, Bramwall Mansions, S. W. Written in a square handwriting that slanted backward.

"Can you read it?" she said. "It's an odd handwriting. An irresponsible handwriting, I'm told, but then perhaps I'm rather an irresponsible person. You may find that out before you're through with me."

With a rather wistful smile she rose to her feet and held out her hand to him.

"And thank you," she said. "You've been very sweet to me."

For James Merrick it had been by no means an easy twenty minutes; but now that it was over he was seized by a desire to prolong it. He wished that there were something else for them to discuss, but he knew that it would be painful for her to talk further, and unprofitable till he had had an opportunity of examining her evidence.

So instead, "I wonder," he said with a little laugh, "that you can trust so delicate a matter to a person you've such little reason for placing trust in."

She laughed in answer, a gay, frank laugh; and her eyes twinkled roguishly. "Oh, that," she said. "Why, now that all that's understood and over we ought to be quite good friends. And just to prove it to you . . ."

And before he had realized what she was doing, she had sprung forward, had flung an arm impulsively about his neck, had kissed him quickly and airily upon the mouth, had turned and, swinging quickly across the room, had paused only for an instant on the threshold to wave a gray-brown muff at him.

The kiss had been so light, so fleeting, that it had left upon his lips no more than the delicate sensation of a passing fragrance. And it was with a sense of loss that he saw the door close behind her dainty person. The room seemed suddenly very empty.

James Merrick had spoken confidently and reassuringly enough to Marian about interviewing witnesses and getting her case cut and dried, but it was with little pleasure that he looked forward to the interview with his father which must precede the opening of any negotiations. He knew only too well what his father's attitude would be. His father was a solicitor of the old school.

When Arthur Montgomery Merrick had come to Lincoln's Inn in the years so comfortable for England

that had followed the Franco-Prussian War, lawyers could be divided into two classes. There were on the one hand the rogues and robbers, the exploiters of dubious causes, and on the other the venerable upholders and protectors of privilege and property. And in the same way those that had recourse to the law could be divided into two classes. There were the heads of family with lands to convey, title deeds to peruse, wills to revoke and draft; and on the other hand the shifty buccaneers of ill-phrased bequests, the scheming litigants, the bearers of false witness, the libellers and defamers, the profligate husbands, and the wanton wives. There had been a clear dividing line between the types of client that a respectable solicitor could accept, and in those days potential divorces had been classed with blackmailers.

When an unknown and casually presented client would arrive with a request that divorce proceedings should be opened Mr. Montgomery Merrick would sit up stiffly in his chair, his lips tightly compressed, his head erect, the fingers of his left hand combing his long black whiskers.

"I am sorry," he would say, "but we do not undertake that kind of work. If you will consult the law notices page in the daily *Times* you will be able to ascertain the names of those solicitors that do."

And when a client of long standing arrived with a story of domestic friction, Mr. Merrick would slowly and sadly shake his head.

"That's sad," he would say. "That's sad. And you

are anxious to be divorced. And your mind is quite made up? Yes, yes, of course. Now and again these things are inevitable. And you've come to ask my advice. Well, I'm afraid that's not very much in my line, you know. We never have touched that kind of work. I'll be delighted, however, to give you a letter of introduction to a firm that does, a firm that I can thoroughly recommend to you."

But that was thirty years back. Customs had changed. And even if divorce had not reached in the early days of the Twentieth Century the fortunate levels of post-war London; even if it had not become wholly free of social stigma, it had become too general to be looked on as much more than a misfortune. Certainly Mr. Merrick had found it no longer prudent to adopt an Olympian attitude towards a relief that so many of his most important clients sought. It was not merely that the negotiation of divorce suits was in itself a profitable proceeding, but the strain and intimacy of a divorce had proved to form a bond between solicitor and client that rarely ended with the granting of a decree, and many clients introduced to other solicitors had ultimately transported their other affairs to them. Mr. Merrick could no longer afford to be quixotic. At the same time his own distaste for the business had remained, and his son knew that the matter of Marian Eagar's divorce suit would have to be presented with a considerable amount of tact. Which was not a task that James Merrick viewed with the prospect of the faintest pleasure. It is never easy

for members of the same family to work harmoniously in the same firm, and Merrick found his father's office manner, simply because it was his father's, extremely difficult.

He knew so exactly how it would happen. He would find his father at his desk, writing or studying documents. His father would lift his eyes quickly from his paper to see who it was; then, having decided that the immediate piece of work he was engaged upon was more important, he would return his attention to his desk, while his son would stand in the centre of the room remarking irritably to himself: "It's only because I'm his son that I'm left standing here. If I were anyone else, even an office boy, I'd be attended to." Then, after a longer or shorter interval, his father would spin round in his swivel chair and, "Well, what is it?" he would ask abruptly, as though the matter were of such little importance that it could be settled in a second. "Just because I'm his son," James Merrick thought, "he can't imagine that anything I've got to say to him can be of the least importance." It was not going to be easy.

It happened exactly as he had expected. His father was engaged upon a letter; he looked up, said nothing, turned back to his desk, and went on writing. Then, after a three-minutes' interval, swung quickly round in his chair. "Well, what's it all about?" he asked.

"Just as though he were a schoolmaster," thought Merrick, "and I was a fourth-former coming to ask for leave off football." And he felt irritated, child-

ishly irritated, and in no mood for the exercise of tact. "Though that's just what I've got to have," he told himself, "if I'm to get this thing through for Marian."

So he smiled breezily, as though there were no cause for disquiet in the news he brought. For there are two ways of approaching an awkward situation. One is to start by making it appear infinitely worse than it is, so that the receiver of the news feels a sense of relief when he discovers it to be less bad than he imagined and does not realize quite how bad it is. The other way is to make it appear light to start with, and gradually present the difficulties. Ordinarily the first method is to be preferred, but Merrick knew his father was always liable to be fussed at the opening of an interview, and he had always found a placid opening the wiser.

"Well, Father," he said, "I'm afraid I've got another of those cases for you that thirty years ago you would have been shooting on to Jimmy Marshall."

"What, divorce?"

"Afraid so; quite straightforward and above-board, though. No complications: cruelty and infidelity. We've got all the evidence and all the witnesses. The kind of thing that'll get rushed through in six or seven minutes."

Mr. Merrick grunted. "Glad to hear that, anyhow," he said. "I'm sick of these divorces; we're getting too many, far too many of them nowadays. Don't know what your grandfather would say if he were alive.

We never touched a single suit while he was here. Refused even the Carlrey case. Lost a good two thousand, too, by it. Wouldn't touch a thing that was likely to hurt our name."

"Divorces don't hurt a name as much as all that now, Father."

"I know, I know. And if the client's an old friend of the firm we've got to stand by him, I suppose. Who is it, by the way?"

"A she. I don't think you know her. Herbert Eagar's wife."

"Herbert Eagar?" Mr. Merrick repeated the name dubiously; then shook his head, smoothing his fingers along the rib of cheek down which thirty years back had curled the whiskers of which his adolescence had been so proud. "Herbert Eagar? No, I don't know the name. Are they old clients?"

"I'm afraid not, Father."

"How old are they, then?"

"They are not old at all. This is the first time that either of them has been here. But Mrs. Eagar is a particular friend of mine."

"I've never heard you mention her."

"There must be a great many friends of mine you've not heard me mention."

"I know, I know. But still . . ." and the long thin fingers were fluttering fretfully between ear and chin. "She's a young woman, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And the charge is cruelty and infidelity. There's no question of desertion as far as you can see?"

"Not so far."

"Um, I see." And again Mr. Merrick paused, and when he spoke it was impatiently and acidly. "Infidelity and cruelty, a young woman. Yes, yes, I know the story. She marries and she gets bored with marriage. And she thinks it would be fun to have some alimony."

"She's said nothing about alimony to me."

"No, but she will. Of course, she will. They all do. That's what she's brought the case for. She'll have all the freedom and all the privileges and none of the responsibilities of marriage."

"But, Father, he has been cruel and he has been unfaithful to her."

"Cruelty and infidelity. Yes, yes, but what do they amount to? Do you suppose that there are many husbands who haven't at some time been rough with their wives and at some time or another been unfaithful? The wise wife shuts her eyes. As long as her husband protects and supports her and is reasonably decent to her, she sees only what she needs to see. And it's her job to. Men aren't the same as women. Men slip into affairs. And it's not fair to a man to try and get rid of him for just one slip. As long as he's good to her and supports her she ought to be content."

"Women don't feel that way nowadays."

"And no credit to them for it. They expect to get a thing both ways."

"They expect fidelity if they give it."

"Do they? I doubt it. They're just out for a good time. That's all they think about. No sense of responsibilities. I suppose this Mrs. Eagar has no children?"

"I don't think so."

"There you are, you see. All the privileges and none of the responsibilities. They're not wives, they're mistresses. They live with a man for a few years; then they move on to the next. I suppose this Mrs. Eagar has another man up her sleeve waiting."

"I don't think so, Father."

And for the first time during the interview Merrick's voice grew tart. Another man! The idea had never occurred to him that it might be in order to marry again that she was seeking a divorce. And yet that was the reason that was at the back of the majority of such applications. It had never occurred to him that it might be so with her, and the idea hurt him.

"I'm quite sure," he insisted, "that she hasn't."

"If she hasn't now she soon will have. And she'll have a nice income in alimony to live her own life with till she does."

"Marian Eagar's not that sort."

His father sniffed impatiently. "She may be or she mayn't. That's neither here nor there. There's too many of that sort for me to run the risk with her. You can send her over to James Marshall. She's their kind of client, not ours."

And with a little grunt he turned his attention to his desk. His son, however, remained firmly in the centre of the room.

"Father," he said quietly, "you're being most unreasonable."

It was the first time, practically, that he had inside the office set his opinion against his father's. And Mr. Merrick swung round immediately in his swivel chair to stare at his son in a questioning astonishment.

"My dear James, I don't understand," he said. "I don't begin to understand. You come to tell me about a case. I give you my opinion on it. The matter ends there."

"But you haven't given me your opinion on the case."

"I have. I've told you to hand it on to James Marshall."

"I don't call that an opinion."

"As far as you are concerned, it is. It is what I propose to have done, anyway."

"But you don't know Marian Eagar, and you're not being fair to her. You're judging her by other people. Because most wives who are suing for divorce are rotten, you say that she must be, and she isn't."

"How do I know that?"

"I give you my word for it."

Mr. Merrick wavered. "You're sure, James, really sure?"

"Really sure, Father. I wouldn't have brought this

case on to you if I hadn't been. I knew how you'd feel about it."

His father looked him very steadily in the eyes, and James Merrick met the look unflinchingly. Working in the same office had been admittedly a strain upon their relations, but at root they were sound friends.

"Are you making a personal matter of this?" said Mr. Merrick finally.

"Yes, Father."

"Very well, I leave it in your hands. Consult with Bradshaw."

And without waiting for any expression of his son's gratitude, Mr. Merrick turned back again to his desk and his correspondence.

It was not till he was in the passage, a little weak and a little flushed by the strain of conflict, that James Merrick found occasion to wonder what impulse had induced him to defend so hotly and after all so rashly a case into whose rights he had as yet no opportunity of judging.

"Let's hope to heaven that Bradshaw doesn't find too many obstacles to raise!" he thought.

It was not without nervousness that he walked down the passage to Bradshaw's room.

*

Bradshaw was the one person in the firm of whom James Merrick was genuinely alarmed. He was an admitted man, Mr. Merrick's managing clerk, and he

stood to Merrick in the same relation that a regimental sergeant major does to a recently joined subaltern. The lot of birth and opportunity had placed him in a position subservient to Merrick's, but never at any time had Merrick been able to persuade himself that Bradshaw was not fitter to deal with any situation than he was himself. Which was a feeling that never made negotiations too easy an affair for them. Usually Merrick endeavoured to pass things off in a light-hearted manner, producing difficulties as though he were inviting Bradshaw to take a drink with him. He did on this occasion.

"Trouble, Mr. Bradshaw," he announced genially. "Another of these unpleasant divorce suits that I'm sure you think are getting us a terrible name in the profession."

Bradshaw looked up from his desk and blinked unsmilingly. He was a wiry, short, sixty-year-old-looking little man who, with his bald head, wrinkles, and tight-drawn parchment skin, might well have passed as a Cruikshank model.

"So, Mr. James," he muttered; "so."

"Yes, Mr. Bradshaw. And quite a simple case, I think. A Mrs. Herbert Eagar who's suing her husband for divorce. Cruelty and infidelity. She found this letter in her husband's pocket."

Bradshaw took the letter between his thin, dry fingers, and holding it up to his left eye, his head bent cockwise over it, he read it out slowly in a thin, wheezing, high-pitched voice, that could have scarcely been

more ludicrously inappropriate to those hot-blooded words. When he had finished the letter he chuckled croakingly, then tapped his finger against the top line of it.

" 'Days and nights,' " he repeated. " 'Days and nights.' And then 'utterly together,' that's good, that's good. Ought to convince any judge. And then the references to dresses at the end. We ought to be able to work that up all right. Would a man, a married man, be giving a girl dresses unless he was receiving some substantial recompense? It isn't even as though he were giving them, he is allowing her to charge them to him. A girl has to be fairly sure of a man before she can do that kind of thing. And no girl can be sure of a man till that man's sure of her. And the way she's put it, too. She starts by reminding him of the pleasure she's given him so as to humour him, so as to make him feel grateful to her, so that he won't be angry with her for running up bills. Pretty, very pretty. I don't think we could have got a greater amount of valuable evidence into a narrower space."

And he tapped his finger appreciatively against the letter. To Merrick it all seemed rather ghoulish. This high-pitched eunuch's voice, this wasted tapping finger, this cold-blooded analysis of what had been spontaneous and fresh and possibly rather lovely. He had no wish to linger in this cemetery.

"So you feel that there's no need to worry about that?"

"I wouldn't say that. Oh, no, scarcely that," said

Bradshaw, cocking his head and winking a watered eye slyly. "I simply said that we could make a very good case out of it. There are one or two little difficulties, of course. For one thing, the letter's not addressed and it's not signed. That's a pity. And we can't as yet identify this Madge. Probably we should be able to if it became necessary. There aren't, I suppose, too many people with the Christian name of Madge who bought frocks at Poiret's round about April the 16th. Not, I imagine, that we shall need to."

"And there's the point that he wasn't at Liverpool when he said so."

"I was coming to that. We'd do just as well to get those facts proved definitely, I think. There's a young man working in Rob and George's that I can trust. He could find out for us whether Herbert Eagar stopped in any good hotel there during those days, because if he'd been going up to see his people he would have to stay under his own name in a good hotel. There's no need for me to make inquiries of Armitage. The hotel registers will be enough."

And as the bloodshot eye blinked again Merrick was forced to recognize, though against his will, the efficiency and logic of Bradshaw's reasoning.

"So there only remains the cruelty," he said.

"Only the cruelty, and you have got the witness's address? Ah, yes, 13B, Bramwall Mansions. A good address, such a lot depends on that. It's so important that the witness should be the sort of witness that will impress a judge. He mustn't be flashy, he mustn't

be shabby, he must look the ordinary respectable clubman. I've known times when it was better to keep good evidence out of court rather than to let it come through an unsound source. It's most important that this Mr. McMurtrie should be the right sort of witness."

"And if he is," said Merrick, "it should be a pretty straightforward case."

The wise eye blinked slowly.

"Did you ever know," said Bradshaw, "any case that didn't look straightforward before you'd heard what the other side had got to say?"

★

Than Mr. Oswald McMurtrie it would have been hard, James Merrick reflected, to find anyone more admirably adapted to the purpose for which in this instance he was required. He might have served as a museum exhibit of the perfect witness. He was tall, but not so tall as to give the impression that he was looking down on you. He was broad-shouldered, but not so broad-shouldered as to make you wonder whether he might prove a bully. His clothes were neat and well cut, with the impression of having been made in St. James's rather than Savile Row, in an establishment little patronized by the stage. His moustache was trim and turned upwards gracefully. Not so gracefully, however, that you were forced to wonder whether a damp compress was applied to it at night.

His features were delicate but not blatantly aristocratic. His manner was a most happy mixture of respectful diffidence and worldly self-assurance. He would give his evidence in the tone of one who performs reluctantly a grave, not too pleasant, but necessary duty. He would not give the impression of enjoying the experience. He happened also to be exactly the right age, thirty-seven; young enough, that was to say, to understand the younger generation: old enough to appreciate the obligations of sound citizenship. As he came into the room James Merrick sighed inwardly with relief. Things were looking well for Marian. He felt himself to be on sound ground.

"I'm afraid," he began, "that the matter on which I have asked you to come and see me will prove somewhat distasteful to you."

The answer was in the tone and spirit that he had expected. Mr. Oswald McMurtrie shrugged his shoulders.

"It's about Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Eagar," Merrick proceeded to explain. "You know them, I believe?"

"Not well."

"You've seen a certain amount of them, however?"

"I have been very often in the same room with them. Eagar is a member of my club. We have a number of mutual friends. It is quite likely, though, that I have never been for two consecutive moments alone with either of them."

Merrick nodded his head. It was even better than he had expected. Evidence such as this, precise but

not irritatingly precise, was of the exact nature that would favourably impress a court.

"You would move, though, in circles where you would be likely to hear them spoken of?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then, possibly," said Merrick, "you will not be surprised to learn that Mrs. Eagar is bringing a divorce suit against her husband?"

It was a question that gave abundant opportunity for flippant comment. But Mr. McMurtrie's Scots gravity remained unstirred. He pouted, made the gesture of whistling, nodded his head twice, slowly.

"So, so," he said. "I'm sorry to hear that, very sorry. One could see they were not in too great harmony with each other. But then one has seen so many couples who appear to have made a mistake, but decide to make the best of a bad job, and ultimately prove the bad show to have been quite a good one. I had hoped that something like that might have been going to happen in the Eagars' case. But she's bringing a divorce suit already? It's sad, that, sad."

"She's suing him on the charges of unfaithfulness and cruelty. On the score of unfaithfulness there can be little doubt. But cruelty, of course, requires witnesses. It is for this reason that I have asked you to come and see me. I expect you will guess to what incident I refer. It took place last winter at a week-end house party of Mrs. Richmond's."

"A most regrettable occurrence."

"Perhaps, because it would obviously be unjust for me to prompt you, and because as her solicitor I want to be able to verify Mrs. Eagar's story by your own, you will tell me what you remember?"

"Of course."

In point of fact, James Merrick had not the vaguest idea of what had happened. He had seen on that first afternoon that Marian was in no mood for a lengthy cross-examination, and since he had been anxious to spare her pain he had not thought it necessary to bother her with a further interview till he had heard McMurtrie's story. He was therefore extraordinarily anxious to know what exactly had happened at the scene which had decided as likely as not the fortune of that marriage.

"It was in the evening," McMurtrie said. "Some of us were playing bridge and the rest were dancing. There were about eight of us staying in the house, and possibly another eight had come in to dinner. Anyhow, there was only one bridge four. And I was Eagar's partner. As far as I can recall, nothing in the least dramatic had been happening during the day: nothing that any of us had noticed. Nor had anything in the least unpleasant occurred during our game. There had been no acrimonious post-mortems. We were playing half a crown a hundred, which was well within the means of each of us. Nobody had been losing heavily. Everything was going delightfully pleasantly, when suddenly Mrs. Eagar appeared.

"The dancing was taking place in the hall, and she

had come into the room on a partner's arm, mistaking, possibly, the study for the dining room, where there would be probably sandwiches and drinks of some kind. On noticing her mistake she turned round as if she were going to leave the room, then hesitated, said something to her partner, and ran back to the room.

"I was Eagar's partner, so I could see exactly what happened then. She came across, leant over his shoulder, whispered something to him that I could not hear. His face flushed, he dropped his cards down on the table; and while she was still bending forward, he hit her."

"He swung round to hit her," Merrick prompted.

McMurtrie hesitated.

"Scarcely that," he said, "it was more a jab than an actual blow, rather like a hand-off in rugger. At first it looked as though he were just going to push her away, and then suddenly the arm straightened out to make a blow of it."

"It was in the face, though?"

"Across the cheek."

"With the fist?"

"The open hand."

"And then?"

"What always does happen at an incident like that. We were all too startled to say anything. We just sat there gaping. Then the man on my right suddenly cut into the bidding. 'Well, it's my call,' he said. 'Three spades.' It was the best thing to do. I had hardly looked at my hand, certainly I had forgotten what was in it.

but I called, 'Three No Trumps.' And the man on my left doubled, and before we all knew what was happening Mrs. Eagar was back in the hall dancing and I was going down four hundred. As far as I'm concerned the incident has not been mentioned from that day to this."

"And you'll bear witness to that effect when the case comes on?"

"If it's necessary."

"It will be necessary."

Merrick spoke on a grim note. He was feeling grim. He could picture the scene so clearly, and he could remember the expression of eyes and voice with which Marian Eagar had described it as "infinitely humiliating"! It was monstrous that a girl like that should have to suffer such an indignity.

"Do you imagine," he asked, "that the whole party heard of it?"

"Probably."

"But there were only the three of you who saw?"

"Possibly her partner did."

"Who was he, by the by?"

"I don't know. I can't remember."

"And the other two men who were playing bridge with you?"

"The other two? Let me see now. One was Rogers; he's in the Sixtieth, he'ld be in India now. And the other: I am bad at names. He was a fellow I hadn't seen before and haven't since. Hodges he was called, I think. I'm not sure. He talked about travel and the

East most of the time. He represents some firm, I think. He was going away in a day or two. I could find out easily, if you want me to."

"It's hardly worth bothering. When it gets nearer the time I'll let you know. Your evidence endorses Mrs. Eagar's so exactly." Then, after a pause, and half vindictively: "Her husband must be a pretty appalling man."

McMurtrie pouted. "You haven't met him?"

"No."

"I thought you hadn't. You'd scarcely say that about him if you had. He's—well, he's not the kind of man I should ever choose to be particularly intimate with, he's not the kind of man that a woman like his wife would have thought twice about if she'd met him two years later. But he's a decent enough chap really. And she was only nineteen when they met."

"Only that!"

"And in the things that matter, a good deal less. It was an odd upbringing. An only daughter with a mother dead. And a father trailing her round from one Riviera town to another, yet keeping her so closely chaperoned that life never had a chance of getting near her. It's not surprising that when her father died she should be fair game for the first man who happened to attract her."

"And he's not really a bad chap, you say?"

"Not by any means. But he's older than she is. Twelve years older, and he's rougher hewn. He's North Country; of a different stock and of a different genera-

tion. They were bound to be at outs with one another."

"Then perhaps," said Merrick, "they're as well rid of one another."

★

A few minutes later he was reporting the interview to Bradshaw.

"If you had hunted all round the world," he said, "you couldn't have found a better witness."

Bradshaw grunted and sniffed, shuffled away some paper on his desk, and produced finally a longish typewritten letter.

"Heard from Liverpool," he said. "Our man didn't stop under his own name at any of the principal hotels."

"Then we may be quite certain that he didn't go up there for business."

"More or less."

"And when you say 'more or less,' Mr. Bradshaw, that means a cast-iron certainty. I think I shall have some pretty encouraging news to-morrow for Mrs. Eagar."

★

One does not make the same journey for five years on five days of the week without knowing pretty exactly how long it lasts. And James Merrick knew to a second how long it took him to walk from the First Avenue Hotel to his office in Stone Buildings. On the following afternoon, however, he kept glancing fretfully at his watch as he sat on his high stool waiting for

his two dozen natives to be opened. Ten minutes to two he told himself. And she would be arriving at half-past. And unless this infernal white-coated idiot put some pace on he would be late and keep her waiting. Although he knew quite well that it would not take him a quarter of an hour to eat two dozen natives, and with the traffic in Holborn at its most inopportune, the walk back would not take five minutes, "I'll be late," he muttered. "I'll be late." And for the first time in the course of his five years' patronage of the hotel, he tapped a fork impatiently on the marbled bar.

The whole day had been for him a crescendo of irritation. His post had consisted exclusively of bills. His secretary had stayed away with a cold and he had had to wait forty minutes till his father's was disengaged to dictate his letters. Unexpected complications had arisen in the title deeds of a client whom Merrick disliked intensely, complications that would involve at least a couple of lengthy interviews. The telephone bell had rung incessantly and needlessly. A series of minor annoyances that on any ordinary day should not and would not have disturbed the urbanity of a young man of fashion; but on the day that had for its climax an interview with Marian Eagar, such hindrances were sufficient to produce in him the equivalent of a temper of gouty testiness.

"The whole situation," he informed himself, "is extremely delicate. It will need to be handled with the utmost tact. It is the most difficult and the most important piece of work with which I have ever been

entrusted. It is essential that I should be in a condition to conduct it satisfactorily. And how can I, on a day when everything is going wrong?" His nerves were in a completely jangled state by the time he returned to Stone Buildings shortly before quarter past two, and he refrained only with the exercise of very considerable self-control from boxing the ears of the boy who came to tell him that Mrs. Eagar had telephoned up to say that she would be unable to come before three o'clock.

"I told her, sir," said the boy, "that you had an important appointment at a quarter past, but she said that she didn't imagine that she'ld be taking up a great deal of your time, so I said that would be all right, sir."

"Oh, you did, and who's my appointment with at a quarter past?"

"Sir Everard Forrester."

"Then you can ring up Sir Everard, and tell him that I can't see him before four."

"But you're seeing Mrs. Humphrey, sir, at four."

"She can come to-morrow."

And with his right fist clenching and unclenching in his trouser pocket he hurried out of the front office to his room to stage for three quarters of an hour imaginary contests of noughts and crosses on his blotting paper.

The moment, however, that Marian Eagar came into the room his moodiness was dispelled. The door swung open and she was standing there, and it was just ridiculous to talk about being ill-tempered when

there were people like Marian Eagar in the world to smile at you. And he forgot that his post had consisted entirely of bills, that his secretary had a cold, that the title deeds of a bore had become involved, that he had before him a very delicate and testing interview. He was conscious only of radiant well-being in the presence of this extremely jolly person. And, "I've got quite a lot of really encouraging news for you," he said. And she was smiling happily.

"Splendid," she said. "But you'd better, I think, read that first." And she handed across a letter to him.

It was quite a long letter. Some fifty close-packed lines that turned the page on the fourth sheet, written in the stiff, unflowing hand of one who is unaccustomed to expressing himself with the pen. It was signed Herbert.

"Your husband?" he asked.

"My husband."

He read the letter.

My dearest Marian:

I cannot say how distressed I was to return and find you gone, with no reason given for your going; only that note telling me of your address, assuring me that you were not ill and asking me not to make any attempt to join you. It was unexpected, and it was crushing. My one consolation is that you have not left me because of some other man. For I know you well enough to be certain that had you done so you would have told me, asking me to divorce you. I feel

certain that it is on account of the friction that of late there has been between us that you have decided upon this step; that you had found the strain too heavy a one to bear.

Well, my dear, I cannot pretend that things have been very happy for some while now, or that this is in any way the kind of marriage that we dreamed of four years ago. I have worried myself a great deal over it: trying to see how we can make things better. I'm afraid I'm a disappointment to you in many ways. I'm older—a good deal older. And I'm from the North. I feel ill-at-ease in London; in your London, that's to say. And I suppose I grow impatient and jealous of those pleasures that I can't share with you. I believe it will be always like that in London. I shall be suspicious of your friends and your interests. We'll never be in harmony.

On the other hand, it would be impossible for me to attempt to transplant you to Liverpool. It would be as alien to you as this is to me. You would feel as out of place among my friends as I do among your friends. This I have been wondering, however. Would it be possible for us to be happy in an environment that would be new to both of us, where we should be starting side by side to build up new friends, and interests, and associations? I think we might. I think it would be worth trying. It seems such a pity to give up a marriage like this, on which we set out so hopefully, at the first obstacle. It's such a confession of failure. And there's a good chance now of our being able to make

just such a fresh start. They're sending a new manager to look after our affairs in Australia. He'ld be living in Sydney. And there's no doubt that I could have the post if I applied for it. There would be a chance there of beginning side by side as we cannot here; of building up a new life in a new country. Don't you think, Marian, it would be worth trying? Please, my dear, say yes. For however difficult I have been at times, I love you very truly still.

HERBERT.

Merrick read the letter quickly through the first time.

Then again more slowly, and with a grudging respect for the man who had written it.

"That's a pretty decent kind of letter," he said at last.

"My husband's a pretty decent kind of man. I'ld not have married him if he hadn't been."

"And you're going to Australia?"

"Oh, no."

"You've written to tell him so?"

"I haven't replied yet. That's one of the things that I wanted to talk to you about. Ought I to?"

Merrick hesitated before he answered. On the surface the letter looked pretty straightforward and sincere, but his legal mind was wondering whether there might not be some trap concealed in it: whether it had not been dictated by some shrewd solicitor with his eye upon its effect in court.

"Your husband had no idea that you had found out that he was unfaithful?"

"None."

"You've never discussed the question of divorce with him?"

"Never."

"Then he can't really have the slightest suspicion that you are proposing to bring this suit against him."

Not as far as I can see."

Certainly it looked all right. Eagar might, of course, have seen his solicitor on discovering that his wife had gone, and it was possible that the solicitor might have suggested that the writing of some such letter would be prudent. It was possible, of course. As a lawyer Merrick recognized its possibility, but as a man he was disinclined to disbelieve in the sincerity of a letter that rang true. All the same, it would be as well to be on the safe side. The fewer documents about the better.

"I don't think I should answer it if I were you," he said.

She accepted his verdict uncritically.

"Right," she said; "and you've got good news for me, you say?"

He told her of the reports that had come through from Liverpool, and described his interview with McMurtrie. "He's the perfect witness," he said. "That one man standing in the box will do your case more good than a dozen documents."

"Then there ought not to be anything to worry over?"

"Not so far as I can see. I'ld rather have liked to have those other two men in the box."

"They couldn't have added anything."

"No, but they could have corroborated; that's always useful. And the one who was between you and your husband would have been able to report your conversation."

"There wasn't any conversation."

"Well, what you said then. By the way, what did you say?"

"Nothing of the least importance. Something about being happy and hoping that he was. It just happened to rile him, I suppose. He didn't like me to be happy unless he was responsible for it. He was jealous of my enjoying myself."

"It seems a pretty violent form of it."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know. We were at outs pretty badly about that time. And when you're at outs it doesn't take much to send you off. I dare say I was pretty difficult at times. We're both well out of it. In eighteen months he'll be agreeing so." And she smiled gaily and rested her hand on the arm of the chair as though she were going to lift herself out of it. "That is all, isn't it?" she asked.

He shook his head. During the morning, when he had been losing his temper over bills and secretaries and title deeds, he had told himself that it was the imminent strain of the extremely delicate questions that he had to put to Mrs. Eagar that was battering his

nerves. Now that the time for asking them had come, however, he was thankful for the opportunity they gave him for a longer talk. He was reluctant to let her go. He was feeling so happy. Although they had been discussing in the most matter-of-fact fashion the details of a divorce suit, he had felt that they were communing beneath their talk in the extremest intimacy with one another. There was harmony between them. And when she went she would take that harmony away with her.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that there are one or two more things to be settled first. There's the question of alimony. How much are you thinking of applying for?"

"I hadn't thought of applying for any. Alimony. Why, that just hadn't occurred to me."

"You're entitled to it."

"I dare say, legally. But I don't need it. I've got close on four hundred of my own a year. That's plenty for anything I may be likely to be wanting. Besides, I don't see that a woman's any right to take money from a man that she's refused to live with. If he's run away from her, that's another matter. Of if there are children. But, even so, it's a bit undignified. If a woman's going to let a man support her she ought to give some value in return. Oh, no, I don't want there to be any bother about alimony."

A good deal that had been said in the course of their conversation had come to Merrick as the surprising vindication of what without proof he had felt intui-

tively to be true about her. Nothing so much, however, as this waiving of her right to alimony. But he gave no sign of his relief.

"That's going to make it all a very great deal easier," he said quickly. "That removes half the difficulties."

"All, I should say."

"Unless you raise some."

"I—I raise difficulties! How do you mean?"

Merrick smiled. The time had come, he knew, to settle the doubt that his father had raised for him, to set the question that in his imagination he had dreaded. But now that the time had come he knew that they had reached a point of such complete intimacy that the asking of the question would be made without embarrassment or offence.

"There's such a person," he said, "as the King's Proctor."

"I don't see how he's going to affect me."

"Most people only want to be divorced so that they may remarry."

He made the remark casually enough, as might one friend to another, but as he made it he felt a tension of nervous anticipation very similar to that which he had experienced when he had asked her if she would accept her husband's offer to go to Australia. He did not know why, but he had felt that life would be grown emptier had she said "yes" to that first question; would grow emptier now were she to admit that there was a second marriage awaiting her. "It's silly of me," he thought. "But she's so lovely and so wild a

thing; in the same way that one doesn't like to think of some wild bird being caged, one likes to think of her at liberty." And it was with relief, with a surprisingly large measure of relief, that he heard her laughing answer.

"Not this time, anyhow. There won't be any secrets for the King's Proctor to ferret out."

"You'll have to be careful. He has a way of mistaking and misinterpreting a situation."

And Merrick blushed, for he knew, as her eyes met his mockingly, that she was remembering the party where they had met and the interpretation he had put on her behaviour.

"Embracing people in public, for example," he suggested.

She only laughed.

"But, my dear, I kiss lots of people. I don't mean anything by it."

"It's apt to be misunderstood."

She shook her head.

"You needn't worry," she said. "I'll be terribly circumspect."

"And terribly bored, most likely."

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps I'll acquire a taste for quiet things."

"And quiet people?"

"Even, perhaps, for quiet people."

They spoke lightly, jestingly; playing across and obliterating the memory of that first meeting.

"In that case," he said, "a staid solicitor might quite

properly suggest to his quiet client that they might occasionally discuss her case in the sort of haunt where quiet people go to amuse themselves."

"And where would he suggest that they should go?"

"Oh, somewhere not too frivolous. Summer is coming. They might watch cricket together at the Oval."

She laughed outright at that.

"If she were to do that," she cried, "her reputation would be lost forever. For one would believe that she was anything but desperately in love with even a staid solicitor if she sat next him on a hard seat on a hot day watching nothing happen on a piece of grass for hour after hour! The staid solicitor must think of something more innocent."

"And when he does, perhaps he might ring her up?"

"Perhaps."

A moment later she was gone. But the room felt less empty than he had feared it might. She had left something of herself behind her: the promise that she would come again. It was odd that that promise should have meant so much to him. They had only met three times, the first time they had quarrelled through his foolishness. The second time she had kissed him good-bye in comradeship. And the third and last time with a laugh and a wave of her chinchilla muff she had been gone quickly. He had wondered as she had risen from her chair if she would kiss him. He was surprised to find himself rather glad that she had not.

III

THE progress of the law is slow.

To those who have never been concerned with litigation the filing of a divorce petition sounds the most easy matter beneath the sun. It seems most admirably swift, most admirably simple. You dine with a couple who seem completely satisfied with life and one another; and before you have time to realize that a number of weeks have passed you read a paragraph in the evening paper announcing that they had been divorced. And almost the next day you meet them at some party with different partners and the pack reshuffled. And you shrug your shoulders and "With divorce as easy as all that I can't think why anyone bothers to get married," you remark. For you have been so busy with your own affairs that you have not realized how many weeks have passed between that first meeting and that brief paragraph in the evening paper. Nor can anyone who has not been concerned in the stress of a contested or even of an uncontested suit realize how much drama, anxiety, and suspense are concealed behind those few bald lines. They are like the synopsis at the head of a newspaper serial, when into a hundred words the essence of some sixty thousand words and endless

hours of the author's time have been compressed. They present the facts, but of the time and labour, the strain and effort, that have gone to their appearance they tell nothing.

In that respect Herbert Eagar was no different from the majority of his contemporaries. A certain number of his friends had been divorced; from one or two of them he had been in receipt of confidences, but nothing had ever come into his life to make him suspect that a decree absolute was anything more than a marketable commodity for which you applied through a solicitor's office in the same way that you applied through your broker for shares in an industrial venture. He was quite unprepared for the reality; for the arrival one morning of a letter bearing the signature Merrick, Hay, Merrick.

In a dazed, uncomprehending way he read it.

DEAR SIR [the letter ran]:

Our client, Mrs. Herbert Eagar, has instructed us to commence proceedings against you for divorce. The petition is now ready for service, and we shall be glad if you will let us know the name of your solicitors. If, however, you do not intend to instruct solicitors to represent you, service could be effected here.

Yours truly,

MERRICK, HAY, MERRICK.

At first he could scarcely understand what he was reading. Divorce, and on what counts? Madge, he supposed, for one. Somehow or other, through Madge her-

self, possibly, Marian had found out. And for the other? Desertion? Scarcely! She would never surely have the effrontery to put that over. And if not desertion, then what else? Cruelty? His face coloured at the unwelcome memory. Cruelty; could she have brought that against him? Was it that that was to be declaimed in court, before a judge, before a gallery of prurient spectators, to be reported in the evening papers so that a work-weary world might be given five minutes of facile entertainment? And was that to be the end of the long dream that Marian and he had shared?

He could not believe it. He had never thought that it could end like this. He had known for a long time, he had been forced to know, that Marian was not really happy; had recognized that their life together would never be the thing that he had hoped for it. She was so much younger than he was; she asked different things of life. He had not been, he supposed, too tactful. There were times when he could not help getting angry at her.

It had been in one of those moods that he had let himself drift into that ridiculous affair with Madge Carruther; an affair that he had ended almost as soon as he had begun it, in disgust and weariness. There had been no solace for him in that kind of thing. He had, in fact, needed that kind of affair to teach him that there could be no solace for him in any other woman. There had been times, he was ready enough to admit, when he had wondered whether it would be possible

to continue the strain of a marriage such as his, when he had asked himself whether he had not been happier in his old bachelor life with an agreeable flat, an agreeably dimensioned income, a varied, amusing life enlivened by such casually pleasant and undisturbing romances as a man of his age and position periodically encounters. Had he been happier before? In a way, perhaps, he had. But in these days he had not met Marian. And though he might have been happier had he never met her, now that he had met her, he knew that he could never be really happy away from her. Marian was the first woman that he had loved wholeheartedly, and he was pretty sure she would be the last. Her wilfulness might make him wretched enough at times, but without her he would be more wretched still. He must make the best of it. And he had been convinced that eventually they would be able to reach some condition of harmony together.

Even when she had left the house he had been convinced of it. He had not believed that she had gone for good. She had needed a change of atmosphere, that was all. It was in a spirit of sincerely attempted reconciliation that he had written to her, in the belief that in a new country they could lay the foundations of a new life together. And he had been hopeful when she had not answered him. She was thinking the matter over, he had told himself. And if she were to put herself to that trouble she would, he felt confident, accept. The more she pondered, the more she would be sure to see the wisdom of it. An instantaneous and abrupt

refusal to consider the possibility of such a change; that alone he had feared when he had written. He had not been worried as the days passed by bringing him no answer. He had been calmly confident, had even begun preparations for the change; and now, on the summit of that confidence, to receive such a document as this!

Even now, however, he would not believe that this was final. It was another example, he told himself, of her thoughtless wilfulness; that, and no more than that. He pictured the scene when she had read his letter, pictured her worried and alarmed at the prospect of deserting the friends and habits among which she had grown up, pictured her searching desperately for some manner of escape, and in her desperation choosing divorce as the handiest and simplest. "I must somehow get out of this," he imagined her thinking. "Anything but Australia." And in such a mood the idea of divorce would have occurred naturally to her as the easiest form of escape from the situation. It was not so much that she wished to be rid of him as of a combination of circumstances that were driving her towards conditions she felt she would detest. He had received the legal document a fortnight after he had written. And it was natural that he should assume that the instigation of divorce proceedings was the direct result of that letter; and assuming that, it was natural also for him to assume that by the withdrawal of that letter he would be able to restore their relations at any rate to their previous position of at least neutrality.

"I'd better go round to these lawyer chaps at once and get things put straight," he thought.

★

James Merrick whistled when a card bearing the name of Herbert Eagar was brought up to him.

"Well," he said, "I wonder," and tapped the pasteboard thoughtfully against his teeth. "Technically, I suppose," he thought, "I ought not to see him." But the instinct of curiosity was very strong. He wanted to know what manner of man Marian had married. "I expect," was his reflection, "that he'll be something pretty rough-hewn and stubborn."

In a way, of course, he was right. Herbert Eagar was not the kind of man that you could think of in terms of teacups and stiff-backed sofas; you pictured him lounging back in vast leather chairs, with a whisky and soda at his side. The club, not the drawing room, was his setting. His clothes were well enough. If you were to see them suspended on hangers in a wardrobe you would think, "There's a good suit, by Jove!" but you would not be bothered to look twice at them on Eagar's shoulders. He had neither the defects nor the qualities of the lounge lizard. And his features were like his clothes. "All the same, I can understand a girl falling for him," was Merrick's comment. There was an agreeable straightforwardness about his manner, a straightforwardness that might possibly be changed into truculence, and his hand-shake was firm without

being more than firm. He was a man that one could go to the point with straight.

"I won't ask you," said Merrick, "what you've come about. We both know that. I'm surprised, though, that you should have—if you're going to fight it, that's to say. And are you?"

Eagar tilted back his chair aggressively.

"I don't think there's going to be any question of fighting or not fighting it."

He spoke confidently in a manner that half pleased and half irritated Merrick.

"No?"

"I don't think so. I don't know what Marian has told you or what she hasn't told you, but there's no need for this Australian business to worry her. She needn't go there if she doesn't want to. I just put it out as a suggestion, and if it doesn't appeal to her, well, there it is; I'll just start thinking round for some other scheme. Tell her that, Mr. Merrick, will you?"

"I'll tell her."

"Because—oh, well, I don't know how to put it quite. I don't know if you're a married man. No? Well, even so, you're not a kid; you know how a chap feels when it comes to settling down. With a girl it's different. Marian was only a baby when I married her, isn't really much more than a baby now, and of course life's a pretty large adventure to her. It's all in front of her. While for me, well, I'd got to the stage when a man begins to think of settling down, and when he's got to that age, marriage is rather more than just an adven-

ture to him. He banks quite heavily on it. He puts a good deal of himself into it. It would be a pity if all that went."

Merrick nodded. He could see the situation pretty clearly: could see how this ill-suited couple had met with such different views, asking such different things of marriage. To Eagar it had been a prelude to retirement, a withdrawing into stability; a making sure. To Marian it had been an opening doorway through which she was to advance upon the countries of keener living. And he could see now how Marian had come to be attracted by such a man.

He pictured that odd girlhood of hers: that drifting from one Riviera playground to another, that constant touch with a life of leisure and pleasure seeking; all the time there had been the sounds of revelry and riot round her. While a father who, whatever he might be himself, had been resolved to shield his daughter, had kept that life closely barred from her, letting her see but never mingle with that sophisticated, disenchanted, pleasure-seeking world. A father who had done his best but had not realized that there was no surer way of disturbing his daughter's girlhood. Showers of gold would keep fluttering into her Danaëed tower: it was an upbringing that explained everything in Marian that had puzzled him. And it was only natural that the moment she was free, with an unfettered income of her own, she should have flung off the ties that had bound her, only natural that having

done so she should stand in her inexperience dazed and bewildered on the threshold of adult life.

And at such a time it would be to such stolid qualities as Eagar possessed that she would turn for safety. She would need to be reassured, set on her feet, established so that she could meet this new world on its own terms. That Eagar had done for her. And of course, when he had done it, her need for him had passed. He had fulfilled his purpose in her life. "We use each other as stepping stones," thought Merrick. She had used Eagar as probably years earlier Eagar had used some older woman, not consciously, but with the instinctive sense of self-direction that is at the back of growth. A brutal business, possibly, but irremediable. One went on using and being used until, he supposed, one met with the ideal companion beside whom one could walk in step. And that Eagar had not been for Marian. It was a pity, but that was all there was to it. And he felt genuinely sorry for this really pretty decent fellow who had come to him in the hope of repairing what was in the conditions of its own nature irreparable.

"One doesn't," Eagar was saying, "want to let all that go without making some sort of a fight to save it."

"Naturally, but——"

"But what?"

"Am I the right person to discuss it with?"

Eagar hesitated; not out of embarrassment; he was apparently making up his mind, and he looked very directly into Merrick's face.

"Frankly," he said at last, "I think you are. I didn't

know if you would be when I came round. I don't know really what I was expecting when I came, don't properly know why I came, in fact. But now I see you, I'm pretty sure that you could make things straight between us if you wanted."

Merrick smiled. "That's an odd feeling," he said, "to have about a man who's no more than your wife's legal adviser in a divorce suit. What am I to her, after all, but that? She comes to me as a lawyer, to ask for a divorce. She sets her evidence in front of me. She asks me if it is sufficient. I tell her that it is." And Merrick spoke those six words very slowly, with his eyes fixed very searchingly on Eagar's face, so searchingly that he noticed the slight jerking of an eyelid, the pressure of thin lips against white teeth.

"I tell her that it is sufficient," he repeated. "She asks me to act on it. I have proceeded to. I am no more than her agent in the case."

Eagar fidgeted impatiently.

"Yes, yes, but you're a man," he said. "The only man, probably, that she's discussed the case with. There must be occasions when she says to you, 'What do you think about this?' Times when you've got a chance of putting things to her from a man's point of view; of explaining things. She's such a baby, really."

He paused, then leant forward across the table.

"Look here, Merrick," he said, and his voice was surprisingly and movingly earnest. "You're not married, but you're not a kid. You know something about women. You won't need my telling you that you can

get into that sort of temper with a woman when it's impossible to discuss things calmly. That's the state Marian and I have got into. I know if I begin to talk to her I shall start quarrelling and we shall be worse off than we were before. What we really need is a go-between, a diplomat, someone who can explain us to each other, who'll smooth things out for us. And you're the person to do it. Marian's a wild thing. I don't suppose she asked anyone's advice before she came to you. I'd heard nothing about it till this morning. You're the one person who could do anything practical towards bringing us together. She's got no brothers or father, after all."

It was horse sense. And it was spoken with an earnestness that appealed to Merrick. Under ordinary conditions he would have felt nothing but approval for this husband who was anxious to save his marriage. As a solicitor he approved of it. As a solicitor he was concerned with the protection of property. Marriage was the cement of property. It was the object of every good solicitor to preserve a marriage wherever possible. At the same time, as a man he could not help being slightly irritated. He could not think of Eagar except as Marian's husband. And there were things about him that seemed inadequate in Marian's husband. The over-bearingly masculine attitude that was symbolized by the sudden dropping of the "Mr.," the insensitiveness to her woman's attitude in the assumption that infidelity and a blow were incidents that could be brushed aside.

"After all," he said a little testily, "you have given her very complete grounds for divorcing you." And he felt a thrill of satisfaction as he noted again the flicker of the eyelid and the pressure of the mouth upon the teeth.

Eagar made no show, however, of irritation.

"Precisely," he answered, "and that is just where you can help me. You're a man. You can explain to her as I can't that that sort of thing is different for a man, that it doesn't really mean anything to him. It didn't to me, anyhow. That must be clear, surely; otherwise I'ld have been wanting to run away with the woman; otherwise I'ld have been only too glad of an opportunity like this."

There it was again, the old insensitiveness: the attitude of the Victorian husband that the wise wife must shut her eyes, that things were different for men, that as long as a man preserved appearances he was doing his duty by his wife. And in a way it was the kind of attitude that Merrick would have been ready to approve. Things were different for men. It was idle to pretend that they were not. Plenty of men whom he looked on as quite admirable husbands were periodically unfaithful. One didn't judge them. Who was he to judge anyone, after all? But at this precise moment the attitude annoyed him. He did not feel that it should be Eagar's attitude. Eagar was Marian's husband. And if one was married to Marian one should not feel like that.

All the same Eagar was pleading very earnestly.

"Surely you could do something about it?" he was saying. "Tell her not to worry about this Australian business. It was just a suggestion, no more than that. I'll call it off. Never mention it again. I did think it a good idea. Do still. But if she doesn't like it, well, tell her not to worry about it. And about the rest, do explain to her, Merrick. She'ld listen to you where she wouldn't listen to me. You can explain to her; show her that that sort of thing doesn't count, not really. She's probably never had the matter put to her in the right way. She's so young. And it would be such a shame to break up a marriage like ours thoughtlessly. We've not given it a fair run yet. And, well," he added, after a pause, "I'm pretty fond of her, you know."

It was that last phrase that decided Merrick. Eagar might not be the right husband for Marian. He belonged to a different generation, to a different way of seeing things. He would never appreciate Marian fully. There were sides in her that he would never be able to develop. Anything that they might share together must be in the nature of a compromise. At the same time, they had tied their lives up together. Eagar was a pretty decent fellow, and in his way he was pretty fond of her. He was not the man she had deserved, perhaps, but there he was. She had taken him. And the poor fellow had the right to be given the best chance he could.

"Very well," said Merrick. "I'll try. I'll do my best."

★

There was a gay laugh from the other end of the line when Merrick rang up Marian a few hours later.

"And what," she asked, "is the staid solicitor offering? That we should watch some cricket?"

For it was a fortnight since they had made their pact, and more than once during that fortnight Merrick had rung up to suggest that they should dine together or go to a concert or theatre. And there had been happy, intimate, confidential talks; hours that made the other hours of the day seem shadowy. It was not that there was anything particularly exciting about those talks. There was no thrill of anticipation; no quiver of suspense. There was instead a feeling of very delightful sureness, a consciousness of being one's self. "Which one seldom is," Merrick had thought as he had watched the door shut behind her the last time that he had seen her home. All his life he felt he had been posing, arranging himself in a certain light, acting before an audience, playing cards, working for effects. But now, with Marian, there was no need for that. He had not to keep that check upon himself, had not to be thinking all the time: "Am I playing my cards correctly? Am I producing the correct effect? The effect that will bring me what I want." There was no need for that. He was not out for anything. He was not playing any game. He could lay his defences down. The two evenings they had spent together had a quality of happiness that he had never known before; a happiness to which they could admit freely, since there was between them none of the strategy of courtship.

"I've been so happy," he said. "We must have more evenings like this."

And she smiled back frankly and uncoquettishly. "Let's," she had replied.

It was only natural that when he rang up she should assume that it was to make some invitation or other. And it was with more than a twinge of regret that Merrick told her that it was something far less frivolous than cricket he had to discuss with her. With more than a twinge of regret he realized how very possible it was that as a result of this talk with her he might never be ringing her up that way again. If divorce proceedings were to be withdrawn and she were to return to her husband, as likely as not he would never meet her more than casually again.

"I'm afraid," he said, "I've got to discuss something really serious with you."

"As serious as all that?"

"As serious as all that."

"Then in that case I'd better put on a hat and come along."

As he sat waiting for her to come Merrick wondered how best he could put before her Eagar's arguments. They would require a tactful marshalling, he suspected, and he began to arrange mentally the stages by which he should present her husband's defence, so that the strong points in it should be properly prepared and set forward in the most advantageous light. The moment she came into the room, however, he wondered how he could have embarked on such a deliberation.

In connection with her he could never think of tact and strategy. You couldn't with that kind of woman. You laid your cards face upwards on the table. You said straight out:

"Your husband's been to see me. He wants you to go back."

And she looked you very frankly in the face. And you knew that you could have no secrets from her. And "Hadn't you better tell me all about it?" she said simply.

In point of fact there wasn't a great deal to tell.

"He's a pretty decent sort of fellow," Merrick said.

"I'd told you that."

"I know. But I hadn't realized quite how decent. He's genuinely cut up; he's genuinely fond of you."

"In his way he is."

"And he's quite sincere in his wanting to begin again. If you don't want to go to Australia, there's not the slightest reason why you should. He just thought that in a new country you stood more chance of beginning a new life."

"A new life! But, my dear," she said, "how can one begin a new life with the same person? We should be repeating the old conditions somewhere else."

"Were they as bad as all that, then?"

"You should know."

She looked at him with a sideways glance, half mocking, half affectionate. She was giving him, he knew, the opening for her husband's defence.

"Perhaps," he said, "you're making rather too much

out of something that meant very little to your husband."

"Little!"

"It can't have meant much, can it? If it had, he'ld have wanted to run away with her, he'ld have been only too glad of the opportunity of a divorce so that he could be with her. It was just a casual attraction, a physical attraction."

"And you think that little something one can make too much of?"

She spoke slowly, with her eyes fixed searchingly upon his face, so that he felt that he was being put on trust. And he wished that the question had been asked differently, had not been made so directly personal. He was reluctant to make her husband's defence an expression of his own opinion. All the same he had promised the fellow that he would do his best.

"Aren't you, perhaps," he suggested, "refusing to look at it from his point of view? A man looks at these things differently. An affair like that doesn't mean anything to him. He was probably fearfully ashamed of it afterwards. It was a momentary weakness. You shouldn't judge him too harshly."

"I don't. I'm not blaming him. I'm merely saying that after a thing like that I don't want to go on living with him. I'd put up with a lot one way and another. And I'ld have gone on putting up with it; as long as I could believe I really mattered to him. But how can I, after that? It was so squalid. If he'd really loved her, it would have been different. I'ld have preferred that."

"If every woman looked on marriage in that light there would be vey few marriages that would keep clear of the divorce courts."

She caught him up quickly. "You mean to say then that most men are like that; that most men have affairs with women that mean nothing to them; women that they pretend afterwards that they despise?"

Merrick shrugged his shoulders.

"A great many do," he said. "I don't mean that they make a practice of it. But I suppose that there are episodes of some sort or other in most men's lives."

"And you think that that is inevitable?"

Merrick hesitated for a moment. It was a question to which a few weeks earlier he would have answered rapidly enough. Men were polygamous, he would have said. Desire was fleeting. You could not expect to feel five years after marriage the rapture of a honeymoon. Tenderness there might be; and gratitude for a happiness that had been shared; companionship and the secure feeling of alliance; of mutually held interests and ambitions. Those there might be. But the glow, the thrill of living; inevitably that must pass. And when the new attraction came your way was there any particular reason why you should not yield to it? No one need be hurt. No one was being robbed: you merely gave that of which your wife had no further need. Why should one deny one's self a happiness? That was how he would have argued four weeks earlier. But with Marian's gray-brown eyes looking deeply, questioningly into his, those arguments seemed singularly

unconvincing. He could not, he felt, repeat those arguments to Marian. Not because he wished to appear in any particularly favourable light to her, but just because he no longer believed them true. The whole attitude seemed tawdry. Ninety-nine times in a hundred it might go that way. Inevitable, though? No, not that.

"Surely it would be possible," he thought, "for two people to care so deeply for each other that any other intimacy would be impossible; they would be the perfect lovers and the perfect friends. And year by year they would dig, by the very fact of that intimacy, deeper and deeper into each other's natures, so that their life together would be a constant novelty, a constant condition of discovery."

That was what he felt: but somehow it did not seem to him that those were of the things one said.

"I don't think," he said instead, "that the sentimentalists are always wrong." And in his smile was implied all that his lips had left unsaid.

And the gray-brown of Marian's eyes grew soft, and the feather boa that hung over her neck across her breast stirred slightly, as though she sighed. "I'm glad you think that," she said. And, "Do you think," she added, "that I should be likely to find with my husband anything that the true sentimentalist would approve of?"

To that question there could be one answer only, and Merrick shook his head. He had promised, however, to do his best for Eagar.

"Most of us," he said, "have to be content in most things with a compromise."

Marian lifted her hands despairingly. "Is that a reason for flinging up the sponge in the early twenties? My dear, what's the good of going on? I can't feel about him again as I did once. Not after that. I'ld only make him unhappy and myself too. There's no reason why we should stay together. I can understand that there are situations where a wife has to make the best of a bad job. There may be children; there may be family ties and obligations; there may be the question of money; there may be the knowledge that a man will go to bits if a particular woman leaves him. I can imagine a hundred and one different situations in which divorce would be morally unjustified. But this isn't one of them. There are no children, I've no parents to hurt. He's scarcely seen anything of his for twenty years. It's simply a matter between ourselves. We've made a mistake. There's no reason why we shouldn't remedy it. I'm young and he's scarcely middle-aged. It may hurt him for a bit, but he'll get over it. I can't matter so awfully much to him."

It was said simply, logically, and decisively: in a tone from which there could be no appeal.

"Then I'm to tell you husband," said Merrick, "that the case is to go on?"

And it was only as she nodded her assent that he realized how immense was his relief at the knowledge that their friendship was to be continued.

"He'll be grateful to me in the end," she said. "He'll

meet some girl who'll make him far happier than ever I could have."

"And you?"

"And I?"

"You too, I suppose, sooner or later, you'll remarry."

"I wonder."

"Was it as bad, then, as all that?"

She smiled, and leaning forward across the desk, her face rested against the back of a gloved hand, she looked pensively towards the window.

"I wonder," she repeated. "In time I expect I shall. I'll be careful, though. And I'll go into it in a different spirit. I didn't give Herbert a chance. I went into marriage haphazardly as most young people do, wondering how much I could get out of it. Romance, freedom, security, companionship: that's what I told myself I should get. I was like a child ransacking a larder. I never thought that there were any obligations on my side, that there was any giving to be done by me. And going into it in that spirit, how could it have possibly turned out a success? By the time I'd discovered my mistake it was too late. It still is too late. One can't begin again with the same person."

"A second time, though?"

"I think if I marry a second time I shall make rather a good wife."

A few minutes later she had said good-bye. There was a pile of papers waiting to be examined on Merrick's desk, but he felt in no mood for work. He felt in no particular mood for anything. He was happy

and at rest: in a trance almost of tranquillity. He wanted to maintain that trance, not shattering it by the introduction of alien influences. He wanted to retain his thoughts on the level where Marian had left them. So instead of opening envelopes and adjusting contracts, he walked across to the window and looked out over the gray and green of Lincoln's Inn.

He reached the window at about the moment that Marian had turned out of Stone Buildings to walk across the Square to Kingsway. With a profound sensation of happiness and well-being he watched her, walking quickly, for the air was fresh, her slim shadow cast in front of her, and as he saw her turn round the angle of the wall that old sense of emptiness returned to him. He did not want to turn back to his work and all that work represented of a life in which she had no share. He was going that evening to a party of bachelors. It would be a lively show. Plenty of good wine; and there'ld be a lot of lively ladies turning up when the curtain had fallen on the Gaiety Ballet. He had accepted the invitation enthusiastically, but now suddenly he felt that he did not want to go.

"I'm tired of that kind of show," he thought.

And he smiled, remembering that the day after to-morrow—in forty-eight hours—he and Marian would be dining quietly together, away from the strain and storm of everything that a month back his life had been.

"I suppose I oughtn't to be," he thought, "but I'm

infernally glad that she decided not to go back to Eagar."

★

"Infernally glad that she had not gone back to her husband." It may be that something of that relief entered into Merrick's manner when he conveyed, a couple of days later, the information to Herbert Eagar.

Anyhow, from the very start the interview went wrong.

"What," Eagar cried, "she won't? She's going through with the case? But she can't understand. Surely you explained my point of view to her?"

For Herbert Eagar was a gentleman who had usually managed to get his way. He had the dour resolution of the Northern counties. And at first he could scarcely believe that Merrick's diplomacy on his behalf had been unsuccessful.

"You're quite sure," he repeated, "that you explained?"

He spoke truculently, and Merrick, on account of that truculence, was less conciliatory than he might have been.

"I did," he said, "very thoroughly."

Eagar clicked his tongue impatiently against his teeth.

"Then if you did . . . I can't understand . . . I mean, after all, if she sees the way I look at it, she must realize that . . . why, heavens, it's ridiculous to go on with the case."

"Your wife happens to disagree."

Eagar's forehead wrinkled into a frown.

"But why, in heaven's name, why? What's she got to complain about? I've treated her all right. I give her what she wants. She's free to choose her friends. I don't know what's the matter with her."

His voice had risen to a high, fretful note, not unlike that of a child when it is denied a plaything. It was a note that irritated Merrick.

"You seem to forget," he said, "that you have given her very abundant grounds for divorcing you."

"Oh, that! I dare say I have. So've most husbands at one time or another."

It was the argument that Merrick himself had put to Marian. But as before it irritated him that Eagar should base his defence on it. It gave the impression that Marian was just any woman.

"People don't get divorced the moment they've got legal grounds for it," Eagar was continuing. "They get divorced because they can't get on: or because they want to marry someone else. They start looking round for the legal grounds afterwards. By the bye, does Marian want to marry someone else?"

"I don't imagine so."

"Then in that case I can't see what's the matter with her. I'm ready enough to go on with it."

The old insensitiveness, Merrick thought, the old masculine assumption that provided the man was content the woman had got to be. Marian was probably well rid of him.

"As far as I can gather," Merrick said, "your wife feels that you'll never really be happy together, that you're both young enough to begin again elsewhere, that at any rate you should have the chance of finding a real happiness. She doesn't see why either of you should be bound to a mistake forever."

"Mistake!" Eagar snapped out the word. "Mistake! She's a wilful, feather-brained, pleasure-seeking little fool who does not know her mind from one half hour to the next. That's all that there is to it." And he leant forward, biting at his nails angrily. "It's preposterous," he said, "preposterous!"

His face was uglily dark, wearing the same cruel expression of the eyes and mouth that it must have worn when he struck Marian. The knowledge of this inflamed Merrick.

"Well, anyhow," he said, "I don't see that there's anything for you to do about it."

He could hardly have chosen his words less wisely. They were practically a challenge. And Herbert Eagar was an extremely obstinate as well as an extremely forceful man.

"Nothing to be done," he sneered. "I should make certain of that if I were you!"

And without saying good-bye he picked up his hat and strode angrily from the room, leaving Merrick to tap his fingers thoughtfully against his chin.

"I'm afraid," was his conclusion, "that I've done a pretty bad day's work for Marian."

★

Which, could he have seen Herbert Eagar's face at that moment, he would have known of a surety that he had. He could scarcely, in fact, have tackled him in a more unfortunate manner. Had he taken him by the arm and talked to him in the man-to-man manner that Eagar understood, all would have been well. Had he said, "This is a bad show, old son, but you know what women are. They're unaccountable creatures. One's got to take them in one's stride as one takes the weather. Let's go and drink it off." Had he said that, Eagar would have walked out of Stone Buildings not happy, but consoled. One couldn't account for women, he would have thought. That was the whole matter; that, no more than that. Men just had to stick together and make the best of it. It was in that spirit that Eagar should have been sent away. But the words that would have done that for him were the very words that Merrick could not say. He could not sit still in patience and hear Marian abused; he could not simulate friendship for the man who had ill-used her. He was angry and irritated and on edge. He had to stand up for Marian. He had to hit back where she was abused. And chance had fatally led his spear to the point where Eagar was most vulnerable.

The Northern competitive temper was aroused. Nothing to be done, indeed. The insolence of the challenge maddened him . . . the insolence . . . the injustice of it. For it was unjust, damnably unjust. He couldn't see that he had treated Marian badly.

He hadn't badgered her into marrying him. It had been her doing as much as his. She hadn't needed much persuading. "Were you surprised when I proposed?" he had once asked her. And she had laughed and told him that if he hadn't proposed to her soon she would have done something desperate to make him. She had fallen in love with him every bit as quickly as he had with her. And because she had been in love with him she had wanted to be married. And now because she was not in love with him she wanted to be unmarried. And it wasn't fair. A woman hadn't the right to mess up a man's life like that: coming into it and going out of it just as she chose, at her own convenience. It wasn't just. You took a wife. You gave her your name, your house, your income. You respected her and cherished her. You quarrelled sometimes. How could you help quarrelling? It was inevitable that two people living in such proximity should find themselves now and again at odds. And now and again perhaps one might find another woman attractive. Was one to be blamed for that? A wife couldn't expect you to feel about her forever as you did on your wedding night. And provided one didn't mix that sort of thing up with one's home life, provided one didn't make love to one's wife's friends; no, really, he couldn't see that a wife had any reason to complain. As long as a man treated her decently and was ready to go on treating her decently, her place was beside her husband. That was the human and natural way of looking at it. And yet the law came in and told him that

he had no right to his wife, and proposed to take his wife away from him on grounds that no sensible person would consider worth the while of bothering over.

Well, he was not going to sit down under that. He was not going to let anyone take his wife away without putting up a fight for her.

The law might come and say, "She's your wife no longer," and it might be that was the law, but he was going to make damned certain it was first. If the law could do that, there was no damned thing the law couldn't do.

"And before I quit," decided Eager, "I'm damned well going to see if the law can't do anything to keep her for me."

★

The solicitor to whom Eagar had resort—Mr. Joshua Ephraim of Gray's Inn Square—had an ambiguous reputation among his colleagues. He was, they admitted, a very brilliant lawyer. So far as they knew, he had never been connected with a transaction of even dubious nature; at the same time they were unable to face with equanimity the prospect of a case in which Mr. Ephraim was conducting the opposition. They could never be certain what he would do next. It was not that he did not play according to the laws. It was just that . . . But what was it? Solicitor after solicitor had grumbled at the end of a defeated case. There was never anything specific. "Fellow's a Jew. Suppose that must be what it is." In the end it amounted

to their being able to find no more substantial basis for complaint. "The most annoying kind of Jew, too," it would be added sometimes. "You can't be dead certain that he is one." For apart from the name Ephraim there was no real reason for classifying as Hebraic the thin, bloodless nose that was actually no more bent than aquiline. "Something odd about him," that was usually the final verdict. And indeed the little thin, hunched figure with watery and protruding eyes, and dry, cold hands that he kept passing over and beneath each other, did make on you at a first meeting a disagreeably sinister impression. Certainly it did on Eagar.

"Looks as though I've let myself in for a tolerably grubby business," was his first thought as he walked across the ominously deep carpet to the small huddled figure beside the roll-topped desk.

"So you have come to see about defending the petition for divorce that your wife is bringing against you," said Mr. Ephraim quietly. "If you will tell me the facts I will tell you how—or rather, whether—I shall be able to assist you."

They say that the law is a machine for complicating the most straightforward of situations, and it may be that in its later stages it is. But few laymen can leave a solicitor's office for the first time without feeling that a trouble which had appeared to them a maze of involved motives and reactions has been miraculously simplified into a fact or two. The story that Eagar had prepared would have filled sixteen pages

of a magazine, consisting mainly of "she thought's" and "I imagined's." The story that Ephraim extracted with a series of questions could have been told on half a sheet of notepaper.

"Now, I think that's quite clear," said Ephraim. "They've got, I imagine, all the evidence about your adultery they need. You didn't go to Liverpool, I take it?"

"No, we stayed in London."

"Then they'll probably have found that out. Of course, their evidence isn't absolutely convincing. The letter's not signed, and there's no address to it. At the same time, I think it would be a mistake to contest that. It's as well to admit everything that isn't absolutely damning. One ought to give the impression of laying one's cards upon the table. It predisposes the Judge towards you. We'll admit the adultery and concentrate on the cruelty. Now, what made you strike your wife? What did she say to you?"

"I forget. Something about enjoying herself and finding pleasant partners."

"That doesn't sound much, Mr. Eagar."

"Perhaps not. But I was worked up."

"The last straw, in fact. And what had gone before to make it the last straw?"

"I don't know. A lot of things. We weren't getting on well."

"An unsatisfactory wife in other ways. Now, in what way was she unsatisfactory?"

"I didn't like her friends."

"Ah, and from what section of society was she taking them?"

"Bohemian, mostly."

"I see. Young, fast people, with whom you, as a serious-minded, serious-living business man had little in common: of whom you disapproved, in fact. The Judge'll understand that. And I suppose she was gadding about in the evenings—theatres, parties, dances?"

"A good deal."

"And leaving you with an empty home to come back to at the end of the day's work. You never went out with her?"

"Not often. I didn't care for her friends or for that life. We both realized that it was better for her to go alone."

"I see. Now, tell me, Mr. Eagar, in other ways was she a satisfactory wife?"

"In what ways?"

"Were your marital relations happy?"

Eagar flushed. "Is that a necessary question?"

"In my opinion, exceedingly."

There was a silence. Herbert Eagar was not by any means a modern. There were certain subjects that he had imagined it impossible for a gentleman to discuss. When he replied it was with a delicacy of perception of which not only Merrick but Marian would have believed him to be incapable.

"I suppose," he said, "that when one is at odds in other things, one's at odds in that as well."

Joshua Ephraim was, however, both a precisian and a realist.

"They were not, I take it though, entirely discontinued? Not exactly? You occupied different rooms? And for how long? During the last twelve months? You started the habit, you say, because you didn't want to be disturbed by her coming back in the small hours. Well, I don't know that we need mention that, unless we have to. The point is that you were occupying separate rooms. And that's a good deal to go on, certainly. Now, you say you disliked your wife's friends. Was there any particular one you objected to?"

"No, it was just the crowd."

"You thought it was an unsuitable crowd for a young woman, certainly for your wife, to be mixing in. I suppose you discussed it with her fairly often?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll assume that before you went down to this party, and during the course of it, this situation had again arisen. This is how I picture it—correct me if I am wrong. You feel you and your wife are drifting apart and you are desperately anxious to restore happy relations. You feel that that is only possible if she will desert this frivolous and worthless set of people. You beg and beseech, but she will not listen. That is how the situation stands on the particular evening that we have in mind. It is a situation in which you will have the complete sympathy of the court. And what we have to do now to retain that sympathy

is to show the Judge that what happened on that evening was the logical outcome of a state of continued and increasing provocation, that your wife's conduct on that evening was, if not inexcusable, at least unwarranted, that the blow was struck by a man tortured beyond endurance. The impression that you have got to give the Judge is that any man under those particular circumstances would have been tempted to strike his wife. That is what we have got to show; I think it is only a question of arranging the sequence of events logically."

And Joshua Ephraim leant back in his chair, his eyes protruding, and his thin dry hands passing slowly over upon each other.

"There are," he said, "one or two points that occur immediately to me. The witness that your wife's lawyers have called was your partner. He was sitting opposite you and was therefore not in a position to hear what your wife said to you. Only one man at the table could have heard: the man who was on your left-hand side when your wife leant across between you. Our opponents have not called that witness."

"They probably did not know that he was in the country. He's only been back three days."

"Then that, very fortunately, leaves him free for us. Very fortunately indeed." And the dry fingers twined about themselves as affectionately as though there had been real blood in them. "It may be," continued Joshua Ephraim, "that he will prove a most

valuable witness." And the huddled figure sank lower in its chair, and the watery eyes appeared to protrude increasingly. "A very valuable witness," he repeated. "The sooner that the three of us can have a little conference the better. The day after to-morrow you will endeavour? That could not be better. In the meantime there is just one other little point. It was in October, I think you said, that this incident took place?"

"The beginning of October."

"And as far as I remember the first weeks of it were very fine."

"The sun shone the whole time."

"Then it would have been a warm night. And your wife, you say, had been dancing. Then she would be a little flushed probably. Quite, exactly. Well, till the day after to-morrow, Mr. Eagar."

★

At half-past five two days later the conference took place. And Mr. Ephraim's eyes gleamed wanly as he rose to greet the tall, thin, nondescript-appearanced man whom Eagar presented to him. An invaluable because a tractable witness was Mr. Ephraim's mental comment.

"It is very good of you to come round, Mr. Hedges. Very good indeed. I am extremely sorry to have to bother you in this unfortunate affair. But we will try to make the trouble as inconsiderable as possible. Mr. Eagar has no doubt acquainted you with the circumstances?"

Mr. Hedges was clearly abundantly embarrassed. He fidgeted with his gloves, the handle of his umbrella, and the bearded extremity of his chin.

"Yes, yes," he said, "yes. Mr. Eagar has explained to me, I need hardly say—well, it is all, you will understand, extremely distasteful. The publicity, the . . . I am very doubtful if I am competent to withstand the type of cross-examination to which in this type of trial witnesses are, I am given to understand, submitted."

Mr. Ephraim smiled reassuringly.

"You need have no alarm, my dear sir, no alarm. Your examination by our counsel will be a matter of three minutes at the outside, and I do not think that your evidence will contain anything that will give opportunities to our opponents. There will be no question of motives or implications. We shall keep ourselves rigidly to the facts. You remember, of course—it's a question that really I need hardly ask—exactly what happened on that night?"

"Yes, yes, exactly."

"Very well, then. I will recapitulate. You were playing bridge in the room opening out of the hall where the dancing was in progress. You were seated on the left of Mr. Eagar. You could see the door. The door opened and Mrs. Eagar appeared on the threshold. Beside her was the young man with whom she had been dancing. She was flushed and seemed excited. On seeing that there was a bridge four in progress she stopped and was about to leave the room; then changed

her mind and, coming into the room alone, ran up to her husband. That's right so far, I believe?"

He paused, and Mr. Hedges, who had been listening with tranced attention and a nodding head, dropped both his gloves and his umbrella on realizing that corroborative comment was required of him.

"Yes, yes," he said, "that is so."

Mr. Joshua Ephraim bowed affably and continued.

"Mrs. Eagar came across the room," he said, "bent over her husband's left shoulder—that is, between the pair of you—and said something in his ear."

"Yes."

"You heard what she said?"

"Yes."

"She spoke in a low voice, and it is unlikely that any of the others would have heard her?"

"That is so, yes."

"You, Mr. Hedges, heard her quite distinctly, though?"

"Yes, quite."

"And the moment afterwards Mr. Eagar struck her in the face with his open hand?"

"Yes."

Slowly Mr. Ephraim crouched backwards into his chair; like some fossilized animal endowed suddenly with the capacity to spring. "Thank you, Mr. Hedges," he said, "thank you. That is admirable. It is most distressing for you, I know, to have to attend this case. It is the kind of unpleasant duty that comes from time to time the way of all of us. And we are both

anxious to spare you all we can. So we shan't bother you to make any comment or impute any motives. I don't suppose that you'll be in the box five minutes altogether. We'll just keep you to the facts. We shan't ask you any more than I have already; except, of course," he added, smiling in genial recognition of the gradual glow of relief that had usurped the harassed expression on Mr. Hedges's face—"except, of course, that we shall want you to tell the Judge what Mrs. Eagar did say to her husband. You heard quite clearly, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Hedges, who for the first time in the interview had shown the least sign of willing coöperation.

"That's splendid, then," said Mr. Ephraim. "And the exact words were, if I remember accurately, 'I'm having such fun, and my partner's being ever so charming to me'?"

On his left Herbert Eagar made a gesture as though he were about to interrupt, but Mr. Ephraim raised a cautionary finger.

"Those," repeated Mr. Ephraim, "were the exact words, I think?"

"Why, yes," asserted Mr. Hedges eagerly in the manner of one who was prepared to make any admission that would hasten the ending of the interview.

"And if you're asked," Mr. Ephraim persisted, "in what tone of voice she spoke, how would you describe it? Yes, yes, I know that it is very difficult to de-

scribe a tone, the *mot juste,* how easily it escapes one. Let me see now, Mr. Eagar, what was your phrase for it? Provocative, I believe it was. Now, would you say, Mr. Hedges, that 'provocative' would be a happy description for it?"

Mr. Hedges was already fumbling his left hand into his right-hand glove, and a murmuring stammer gave the impression that than the word "provocative" no happier epithet could have been chosen. And, "I think," said Mr. Ephraim as the door closed behind their liberated guest, "that thanks to that gentleman we are appreciably nearer a happy issue."

Eagar, who, except for his solitary attempted interruption, had listened and watched in silence, shrugged his shoulders. "If you think we are, I'm of course delighted."

Mr. Ephraim smiled knowingly. In much the same way that Cinderella's fairy godmother smiled knowingly at the innocent pumpkin which concealed a chariot.

"But you don't see how I've arrived at my optimism? Ah, well, why should you? The whole object of cross-examination is to extract admissions without allowing your witness to realize that they are admissions. A good counsel will be able to make very pretty copy out of that evidence. You see," he said, and, as always when he was in a good humour with himself, Mr. Ephraim receded into gnomelike proportions, "the position is frankly this: you have committed adultery—of that there is no doubt; and you have struck

your wife in public—of that there is no doubt; and you will be divorced unless we can show that that blow was not a proof of cruelty, of persistent cruelty, but was the solitary outbreak on the part of a husband who endured with exemplary—with unusual—patience the really inexcusable behaviour of an unsatisfactory and provoking wife. We have got to prove that in spite of that blow you were anything but a cruel husband."

"And can you prove it?"

"I shall have a good case, anyhow, to present," and he paused and smiled and passed his hands over and over one another. "A case," he proceeded, "that may with a little strengthening prove unassailable. I shall present it," he said, "like this."

★

"I shall," said Mr. Joshua Ephraim, "present you to the Judge as a serious, well-intentioned man; a man of influence in business, the kind of man on whom, we are always assured, the man in the street believes the security and future of the Empire to rest. It is of the greatest importance to the Empire that men such as yourself should marry and rear families. And when you married it was with the firm resolve to rear a family that should leave the country, as you hoped yourself to leave it, better than it found it. Unfortunately you did not select the type of woman best fitted to coöperate with you in such a resolve. Not by any means.

"Your wife proved herself to be a shallow, frivolous, pleasure-seeking creature; she had no use for the decent, quiet, domestic life you hoped for; she wanted theatres, dances, parties: a constant succession of excitements. Naturally she did not want children. That would be a tie upon her. And naturally she found herself drifting into the only set in London where such a life can be procured: the fast, cheap Bohemian set in which the ordinary standards of decent conduct are derisively ignored.

"You, of course, had nothing in common with such people. You hated their parties, their noise, their behaviour, their late hours. You begged her to cut away from them. You told her how much you disliked it all. She refused to listen. Finally you told her that you could not accompany her to such places. Her retort was that she would go alone. It was a decision that led inevitably to constant discussion and constant friction. You were trying to lead her back into decent habits; and she persistently refused. You began to drift apart. She was a breach that was symbolized in your occupying of separate rooms.

"This state of tension was at its height when you went down to this week-end party. You had been telling your wife that she was moving in a rotten set, that it is impossible to touch pitch without being contaminated, that there was only one climax to that life. As usual, she refused to listen. You had reached the limit of your patience. You were, through abnormal conditions, in an abnormal case of mind. You

were capable of doing things that would be at a normal time unthinkably impossible. This is how our counsel will present the drama of that evening.

" 'Here, my lord,' he will say, 'is a worthy, sincere citizen reduced to a condition bordering on hysteria by a selfish, frivolous, self-indulgent wife. And it is to a man in such a mood that the following incident occurs. The door of the room is flung open, and his wife is standing on the threshold. She is flushed and excited, and a young man is at her side. She had come into the room believing it to be empty. And when a young woman searches for an empty room with the young man she is dancing with, it is natural that a husband's jealousy should be roused. The wife, on seeing the room occupied, is about to turn away, but a spirit of recklessness seizes her. She cannot resist the temptation of a parting shot. She runs across to her husband, leans over his shoulder, and whispers provocatively, "I'm having such fun. My partner's being so charming to me." Is it unnatural that the exasperated husband should for a second lose his self-control? "Fun." She knows how he detests her idea of fun. And "charming." Can the word "charming" in that context, with the knowledge that she has been looking for an empty room, mean anything but that her partner has been making love to her?'

"That is how our counsel will present your case.

"Afterwards we shall point out, of course, how miserable, how disgusted with yourself you were. And you tried harder than ever to wean your wife away

from that Bohemian set; you longed to reëstablish harmony. It was useless, however. She would not listen. Things went from bad to worse. Your wife was a wife to you in little more than name. You became more and more unhappy. And finally, when temptation came your way, you yielded to it. We shall not, I think, make any particular attempt to palliate that yielding. No one, we shall say, regrets it more than you do. It was the yielding of a distracted, tortured man. You wanted to forget. Some men seek forgetfulness in wine. You sought for it in an intrigue. You were disgusted, however, and abandoned it. And when you had recovered from it, you tried all the harder to make things happy in your home. You still believed that it was possible for you to rescue something from the wreck. Even when she left you, without the least warning, the least explanation, you went on believing that. To such an extent indeed, that you devised the scheme of starting a new life in a new country with her. Her only answer to your letter was the filing of a petition for divorce.

"We shall show, in fact, that that petition was not the attempt of a wronged woman to regain her rights, but the final example of an irresponsible woman's effort to avoid her responsibilities.

"And I think," concluded Mr. Ephraim, "that we shall be able to make a pleasantly convincing case of it."

★

Herbert Eagar had listened in silence while Mr. Ephraim talked. He had made no interruption, but once or twice he had frowned uncertainly.

"As far as I can see," he said, "it's going to be less of a defence of me than a blackguarding of my wife."

Joshua Ephraim shrugged his shoulders.

"It amounts to the same thing," he said. "We establish contrast. And it is easier to run a person down than to run a person up. People are always readier to believe the worst."

"All the same, you . . ." and Eagar hesitated. "You see," he went on after a pause, "Marian isn't really much like that."

Ephraim was ready with his retort.

"People very rarely are much like the picture that an opposing counsel tries to make of them," he said. "Do you think you'll recognize yourself in the portrait our opponents are busying themselves on?"

"Perhaps not." He remembered savagely his talk with Merrick, the insolent young cub. It would be foolish to look for much decency at his hands. They would be anxious enough to blackguard him. "Oh, very well," he said, "if that's all there is to it. I suppose it is all, isn't it?" he added sharply on observing that the compressed dimensions of Mr. Ephraim were growing even narrower. "That is all there is going to be to it, isn't it?"

Joshua Ephraim cocked his head sagaciously. "There

is one very weak point about the evidence," he replied.

"And that point?"

"I think we shall find it a little difficult to convince the Judge that the mere fact of your seeing your wife in the doorway at a young man's side, even if she was flushed and excited and was looking possibly for an empty room, would make you so jealous that the mere suggestion that her partner had been flirting with her, and the word 'charming' has to be quite generously interpreted if it is to hold that meaning . . . well, a blow in the face is a fairly serious thing."

Eagar clicked his tongue impatiently against his teeth.

"I was beside myself, I know. Don't imagine that I've not been ashamed enough over it."

"Precisely, but our object is to persuade the Judge that it was an act over which there was no need for you to feel overpoweringly ashamed. It must look like—well, how shall I put it?—as though it had been a logical and merited rebuff. Therefore I think it will be necessary to show that you had strong reasons for suspecting that it *was* with the intention of flirting with this young man that your wife had left the dancing room; I think you should be able to show that you had good cause for jealousy, that your wife knew you were jealous, had played upon your jealousy, had taunted you with it, that she knew very well that there was only one interpretation of the word

charming, that her words were a deliberate provocation. I think that we ought to be able to prove that."

Eagar smiled ruefully. "I dare say we ought. But I'm afraid that's one of the things we shan't be able to do."

"No?"

"The only thing about my wife's behaviour that gave me even the slightest satisfaction was the certainty that she never gave me any real cause for jealousy."

Mr. Ephraim raised his eyebrows whimsically.

"The husbands who can make that boast, Mr. Eagar, are extremely few."

"My wife was an exceptional woman."

"Still . . ."

And there was a pause, during which a number of times Mr. Ephraim nodded his head slowly forward. He appeared to have no doubts as to what was in his mind, but only as to how what was there was to be expressed. "Even so," he said at last, "if what you say is true, and no doubt it is, it is hardly possible that a wife moving in such circles cannot sometimes have found herself in circumstances that might be misunderstood: circumstances that you might know to be innocent but which would have seemed compromising to a less trusting husband."

"It's possible. I've never bothered."

"It is more than possible, Mr. Eagar. It is highly probable that your wife has at some time or another placed herself, thoughtlessly or not, as the case may

be, in a situation that would make her liable to the most grave suspicion. I think that the evidence of such an incident would make your case practically unbreakable."

"And I, Mr. Ephraim, would see myself dead before I would make use of it."

Mr. Ephraim made no reply. He was used to such outbursts. He wriggled a little forward in his chair and placed his right hand sympathetically and confidingly on his left. His head cocked a little to one side. He could afford to wait.

"My wife," Eagar continued hotly, "is not that sort of woman. And I do not propose to have her held up to court as one."

Mr. Ephraim nodded as though he were completely in agreement with his client's attitude.

"You prefer," he said, "to be blackguarded yourself?"

"Is it a question of blackguarding?"

"It is a question of your being convicted before the world as a man who is not fitted for the privilege of a wife's loyalty. If he is cruel to her and unfaithful she demands the law's protection, and the law, in giving her that protection, accepts her view of him. It isn't a pleasant business. It is not a position in which one would be anxious to place one's self. You may say that two blacks do not make a white, but most men are anxious to see their good name protected. I don't want to bring any pressure to bear on you, I am not here to influence a client but to advise him of the

facts. And I say that if you want to defend yourself against these accusations you would be enormously strengthening your chances if you could support your contentions by some concrete incident, provided, of course, you can find one, of such a nature as I have mentioned.

"Don't bother to decide now, Mr. Eagar. There is no hurry. We have quite a number of weeks ahead of us. Let me know any time how you feel about it."

★

It was close upon seven when Eagar reached his home. And the spring day, which had been overcast since morning, was closing in a disconsolate dusk. The plane trees in the square were drooping moodily; the murmur of the traffic was low and menacing. There were no welcoming lights behind the curtained windows; for the rooms that faced the gardens had been mainly Marian's and were now rarely used. And the heart of Herbert Eagar was heavy as he stood in the hall turning over the indifferent letters that the day's post had brought him. He was tired and he was lonely. He would have given much for a little warmth, a little kindness; for someone who would let him be. He was so weary of fighting; and his whole life seemed to have been nothing else. With his family first of all, then with his employers, afterwards with his associates. Everybody you met was trying to get something out of you or else you were trying to get something out of them. You were scheming, planning,

watching. There was continued tension. You could never relax, never be at ease. And when you married it was the same thing over again. A woman wanted something out of you, you wanted something out of her. There was the scheming, the bargaining, the watching. Never any tranquillity, never any peace.

"I suppose I must be getting old," he thought as he walked slowly up the stairs. There had been a time when conflict delighted him.

He took his bath slowly, and as he lay back in the cooling water, his eyes resting on the white tiling, with its glass shelves, its mirrors, its rows of bottles, he remembered how as a young man of twenty-five, during a week-end visit to an employer's house, he had seen such a bathroom, wide, and white, and warm, for the first time. Its space and comfort had seemed to him the apex of civilized enjoyment, the symbol of success. "One day," he had said, "I'll be having a house with a bath like that in it."

Eagar smiled ruefully at the memory. He wished life was as simple a business now, wished that he could see it still in definitely marked stages, could look in the same spirit as he had once looked at a bathroom and later at electric broughams, at a steam yacht, say, and think, "My word, I'll have one of those one day!" Life was easy when one could feel like that, when one could set one's self objectives and work towards them. But a time came when you realized that such standards of success were relative: when you found yourself in a vacuum, with nothing definite

to work for, not knowing what you wanted. "I wish," he thought, "that I could find myself once again really wanting something."

Ah, but he knew well enough the thing he wanted when he sat down to the lonely dinner in the silent, dark-panelled room. If only there were a woman at his side with the candlelight falling on her shoulders, and on the diamonds gleaming in her hair; a woman who would smile kindlily at him, would listen to what he had to tell her of the day's happenings, who would encourage him, with whom he could discuss his plans, the plans that would no longer be his but theirs. A woman who would be tender and sympathetic, whose loving of him would sweeten life so that the old strain and tension would be drained from it. If only he had a wife like that! If only Marian had been a wife like that! There was nothing he would not have done for her had she been. Nothing he would not have given her. She could have had her own way in everything. He would have slaved himself to the bone for her. If only she had been that sort of wife!

And, after all, why shouldn't she have been? He wasn't, surely, such a monster as all that. Other people didn't find him so. If only she had tried a little, such a very little, had met him even a twentieth of the way; but she hadn't. She had been wilful, selfish, frivolous; she had looked on him and her marriage with him as one of the frocks you wore for a season and then chucked aside. That was all he had meant to her. And now she was going to drag him through

the courts, she was going to have him labelled before the whole world as a bully and an adulterer, as a man so foul that his wife had to call in the law's protection. That was her return for all he had given her, all that he had been prepared to give her. It was unjust; it was monstrously, unthinkably unjust.

The butler was removing a plate, was handing a dish to him. He helped himself to a cutlet, but he knew that he could not eat it. His loneliness and the sense of an injustice done to him mingled stiflingly with his obstinacy, his masculine vanity, his refusal to let go without a struggle. He could not eat. Impatiently he pushed away his plate, rose to his feet, and left the room.

He was no more able to read than he had been to eat. He could not endure the dark, book-lined library and all that his sitting in that room symbolized of failure and frustration. Better to face the long empty drawing room, striding among its ghosted memories; the drawing room in which they should have been sitting quietly side by side as wives and husbands used. Why couldn't she have been decent to him? What had he done to deserve such treatment: to be left like that without warning, to be threatened with a divorce suit of that nature? The things he had put up with from her: her neglect, her coldness, her lack of sympathy! And she had imagined, he supposed, that he would just sit still and let her denounce him to the world as an adulterer and a bully. And there was that dandified young whipper-snapper of a

solicitor talking about there being nothing he could do about it! Trying to put that bluff across; on a man like himself too. These Southerners! Well, she and he would find out their mistake right enough. For a good deal he was prepared to stand, but not for that. He'ld show her that he could hit as well as she: if they were going to start dirt flinging, well, so was he. She wasn't going to escape that way. What was it Ephraim had said about a woman who had led her kind of life having been certain to place herself now and again in an ambiguous position? No doubt she had. And if she had, he'ld ferret it out all right.

His eyes that were glinting now with malice fell on the desk between the windows: the desk where she wrote and kept her letters. Locked, he supposed, when she had gone. Yes, to be sure, of course. Heaven knew what she might have hidden there. And she had imagined that to turn a key would be enough protection. She had been so sure that she could trust him, as she could have done, of course, as long as she had let him keep his faith in her. But now . . .

Eavesdropping. Playing the Peeping Tom. Well, one couldn't worry about those fine distinctions now. He was fighting, and you didn't wear gloves against a man who was fighting with bared fists. He had got to find what evidence there was. Had got to . . . got to . . . Anyhow, at any cost. He picked up a poker from the grate. With two blows he had smashed the front of the desk to splinters.

★

Two days later James Merrick received a letter from Gray's Inn Square announcing that in the case of Eagar *versus* Eagar Mr. Joseph Ephraim accepted service on behalf of the defendant.

IV

THE progress of the law is slow.

For weeks, ever since he had learnt that Eagar's suit was to be defended and that Ephraim had been chosen as a solicitor, James Merrick had awaited the proof of the evidence with a feverish impatience. Though he had done nothing to alarm Marian, had assured her that in all probability the defence was no more than a bluff, a gesture to impress the Judge, so that all suspicions of collusion might be removed, he had looked to the outcome with considerable misgiving. The most convincing evidence became quickly vulnerable under cross-examination. And he did not look forward to the prospect of Marian's appearance in the witness box. Nor had the letter itself been reassuring.

For some such letter he had been, of course, prepared. He had known from the manner in which Eagar had stormed angrily from the room that Marian's husband had no intention of sitting quietly and letting himself be divorced without making some gesture of self-protection. He would probably not contest the actual charges, but the issue by maintenance he would fight to the last farthing; that Merrick had

been prepared for. Nor had he felt any particular alarm. There was not going to be any squabbling about maintenance. The signature of Joshua Ephraim, however, was not calculated to ensure the feeling of composure. Joshua Ephraim. One did not go to a man like that, or rather a man like Eagar didn't, unless one had some fairly disagreeable business to transact. "I wonder," he thought, "what Bradshaw will have to say about it."

Bradshaw's reception of the news was much as he had expected. A smile like winter sunlight flickered over the lined and bloodless face. And it was in much the same way that a connoisseur will savour a bouquet of old brandy that Bradshaw pursed his lips forward approvingly. He scented battle, and he was content. A long case full of nice points and doubtful precedents. It was of such stuff that the happiness of Mr. Montgomery Merrick's managing clerk was made.

"I wonder," he said, "what line they'll take. They may attempt to deny the whole thing. I rather hope they do myself. As I warned you, the adultery evidence is by no means conclusive. It's sufficient, however, to impress a man of the world. And if the Judge thinks they're lying there, he'll think they're lying the whole way through. If they're shrewd, and Ephraim is shrewd, they'll admit the adultery and concentrate on the cruelty."

"But we've got plenty of evidence there, surely?" Merrick expostulated.

Bradshaw shook his head.

"As far as it goes," he said. "Yes. But how far does it go? We have the evidence of one blow. Evidence that I think no court could disregard. But one blow does not constitute cruelty. Cruelty, to be an occasion for divorce, has to be persistent. We have submitted in our petition that a campaign of cruelty culminated in that blow. And if that evidence is not going to be subjected to cross-examination we should be able to maintain that blow as a proof of sustained cruelty. But under cross-examination it would be nothing like so easy. We have nothing to advance but that single blow. We have no other incidents. We might find it difficult to show that that one blow was anything but an isolated incident.

"It's the kind of evidence," he went on, "that may look very well on paper but that can be made to look very foolish by a clever counsel. What is it, after all—one blow with the open hand in public? Can't you hear the cross-examination? 'How hard was the blow?'—'Very hard.'—'Did it knock you down?'—'No.'—'Did it make you bleed?'—'No.'—'Did you go on dancing afterwards?'—'Yes.'—'Do you imagine that it would be possible for a grown man to hit a young girl really hard in anger and yet for that blow to leave no mark and for the girl to be able to go on dancing afterwards? I suggest to you that this blow, which you describe as an act of such gross inhumanity that you demand the law's protection against your husband, was no more than a rather impatient push!'

"That's how he'll argue, Mr. James," concluded

Bradshaw. "I don't say it's hopeless: I merely say that it's going to be difficult, extremely difficult. It's a great pity," he added thoughtfully, "that the blow wasn't given with a clenched fist."

★

In no way, however, had Merrick allowed anything of this feeling to appear to Marian. They scarcely ever talked, indeed, of the divorce, not, that is to say, of its actual details. They spoke of it as something that had to happen, as a date upon the calendar, after which life would grow easier and freer. In the same way that one might say, "when the winter's over I'll go down to my country cottage," she spoke much and eagerly, of all that she would do when her freedom came. It would be the first freedom that she had ever really had. There had been the closely guarded years of her father's lifetime, the few dazed London months when she had been uncertain of herself and her surroundings, then the captivity of marriage. She had never had a chance of knowing what she wanted to do and doing it. "It's marvellous," she cried. "Marvellous! To think of all the things that I'll be able to do."

Half their time together was spent in discussing her plans, and as the weeks went by, increasingly she found herself substituting "we" for "I." "It would be fun for us to do this, wouldn't it?" she would say. They had grown such friends, she and Merrick, that it was only natural to assume that he would have some share in the new life that was before her. Look-

ing down the avenue of a carefree, golden, imperfectly discerned future, she pictured herself with Merrick as her companion doing the kind of jolly, foolish, ragamuffin things, peeping into queer places, making odd expeditions, that are only possible between intimates, because you must have someone you can laugh things over with when the experiment proves a failure, someone you can make jokes with of your discomfitures. "We'll have plenty of fun together," she would say. And it was in that spirit of happy confidence, not overeager to probe into the future, that two or three times a week they dined and danced together, and on Sundays drove out picnicking into the country, letting themselves, meeting by meeting, relax further into the charm of an unexacting because sure-based intimacy.

Merrick was not going to have those hours spoilt by the shadow of any legal complications.

Within a very few moments, however, of opening the long envelope that contained the proof of evidence he knew that for a while, anyhow, the security of those hours was at an end.

It was worse than he had expected. Everything was admitted and everything was justified. Adultery had been committed, but under such and such conditions. A blow had been struck, but under such and such conditions. Detail by detail the process of defence was stated. The wilfulness of Marian, her selfishness; her disloyal and unwifely conduct; her attitude towards men that in a set where infidelity was condoned

bordered constantly upon the brink of infidelity. A defence backed up by the testimony of witnesses who had seen her at this and the other party, where such and such things had taken place, who had observed her behaving in a way that Merrick knew to be completely innocent but that could be made to appear immodest in the witness box; a defence that presented as its culminating justification a letter to Marian addressed and signed and dated.

My Darling One:

So you are to come after all to the show on Sunday and you are to dine here first. We'll be alone, and I'll be counting the minutes to eight o'clock. My lovely one, if you only knew how much of my time I spend thinking of you, if you knew what it meant last week to hear you splashing in a bath only three yards off, with just the door between us. My lovely, my tantalizing one, are you never to be snared?

It was signed "Jack"; and Merrick, who knew well from Marian's conversation who "Jack" referred to, and from his stage friends what manner of reputation Jack Rutterthorpe possessed, whistled pensively. The case had grown foully complicated. Bradshaw had been right when he had said that any case looked simple till you had seen the other side. And the other side had on this occasion done their business well. They had disarmed attack. They had admitted everything and contended nothing. They had not even levelled a counter charge of infidelity. They had em-

ployed tactics of understatement. They had done no more than maintain that Marian's conduct had been sufficiently free to warrant jealousy, but they had produced so much evidence that the Judge was very likely to believe the worst of her, and believing the worst to feel respect for the side that had made no attempt to substantiate the graver charge, that had only brought forward that of which it could be certain. The Judge would be prejudiced in their favour. He would be ready to believe everything they brought forward.

"They're clever brutes," thought Merrick. "I suppose I've got to see what Rutterthorpe has to say about it."

★

The name Jack Rutterthorpe is not one that to-day would sound familiarly in the ears of many; nor even ten years ago was there more than a short paragraph in the evening papers when a stray machine-gun bullet of the Somme set a limit to its owner's career. It was, indeed, a rather charitable bullet. The career is brief of the theatrical favourite who depends for his reputation not on the solid basis of stage technique, but Jack Rutterthorpe had outlived his hour and his looks. He would have stood little chance after the war, and after a four years' break, of competing successfully with younger and established rivals. But in his hour in the early days of the Twentieth Century his photograph was to be found on the mantelpiece of many

a dreaming damsel, and the servant girls were many who had closed their eyes beneath the kisses of a rustic swain in a fond illusion that they were the arms of Jack Rutterthorpe that were about them. If legend is true he was a very dashing, very debonair, infinitely seductive person. He was also, if legend does not lie, extremely vain, extremely selfish, completely untrustworthy and disloyal. He was the type of man that other men dislike and distrust intuitively.

The moment he came into the room James Merrick felt a shudder of irritation. He had several times seen Rutterthorpe act and been amused by him, and now and again he had been in the same room with him. It was the first time, however, that they had met, and he disliked the effusive manner and the limp handshake of this too well-dressed, too self-satisfied young dandy who was in part responsible for the mess in which Marian now found herself. How ridiculous, how maddeningly ridiculous it was that a judge could be persuaded that such a girl as Marian could ever treat such a creature seriously. His sense of irritation was so acute that it pleased him to think what a shock to that complacence the news he had for him would be.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that it's not over too pleasant a matter that I have asked you to come and see me. You know Marian Eagar, don't you?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"Then perhaps you'll remember writing her this letter?"

Again Merrick watched with amusement that thriftless, handsome face assume an expression of furtive, suspicious fear. Rutterthorpe hesitated, uncertain whether he would commit himself by speaking.

"You needn't worry," said Merrick with a smile. "You can say what you like here. We're on Mrs. Eagar's side."

"Side?"

"Yes, it's the other side that's putting the letter into court."

Jack Rutterthorpe drew a pale mauve silk handkerchief from his pocket and tapped his forehead with it nervously. "Is it in connection with a divorce suit?" he asked. And his alarm was so pitiable that Merrick could not resist the temptation to prolong it. He nodded his answer.

"And I'm being cited as a corespondent?"

Merrick laughed. "Oh, no," he said. "Mrs. Eagar filed a petition against her husband, and the production of this letter is part of the husband's defence. There's no counter charge, so there is no need for you to get frightened about damages."

The expression of relief was as pitiable as had been the expression of alarm. "There's not much fight to this creature," thought Merrick as he proceeded to explain the situation.

"I see," said Rutterthorpe when he had finished. "And this letter is produced merely to show that Marian Eagar is the kind of woman about whom a husband would be justified in feeling jealous?"

"Exactly."

"And what is it that you are asking me to do about it?"

"I am asking you to go into the witness box and assure the court that Mrs. Eagar may seem a flighty and irresponsible person, but that no one knowing her as well as you know her, and as her husband must be assumed to know her, could ever doubt that her conduct was anything but completely innocent."

Rutterthorpe raised his eyebrows, and there came into his face the sly expression that people assume when they are about to impart some scandal.

"Are you quite sure," he said, "that I should be telling the truth?"

Merrick gave him no encouragement. "Quite," he snapped: snapped so fiercely that Rutterthorpe started back in his chair. He had been unprepared for so dogmatic a vindication. "Oh, yes, yes, yes, I'm sure," he stammered. And leaning forward he hesitated, so deeply occupied with his thoughts that he forgot the theatrical gesture, the finger along the temple, the lips pursed and the forehead creased, with which ordinarily he would have accompanied such a process. After a few moments' reflection he had sufficiently recovered his composure to nod his head, in such a way as befitted the hero of romance who has fathomed the machinations of an opposition.

"This letter will, I take it," he said slowly, "be read out in court?"

"It will."

"And what interpretation will be put on it?"

"It will be imagined that you and Mrs. Eagar saw quite a lot of one another, that she was in the habit of taking baths in your flat, and that you had hopes of making successful love to her."

"And this letter will be printed in all the papers?"

"In view of your prominence I should say most certainly."

"And with the whole of England putting the same interpretation as the Judge on it. Yes, I see." And he paused thoughtfully. "Look here," he went on, "are the opposition likely to call me as a witness?"

"It's unlikely."

"Unlikely, well," and again he hesitated. "You know, I'm not at all sure that I want to be mixed up in this. I'm not at all sure that it will do me any good. What do you think?"

"I'm afraid," Merrick replied, "that I hadn't been thinking of it from your point of view particularly. I had been looking at it from Mrs. Eagar's. You will be a most important witness for her. The word of a person in your position will carry weight. If you tell the Judge that, in spite of the fact that you were in love with her, you are convinced, and you consider that her husband should be convinced, that there is no cause for jealousy, why, that will mean a good deal to Mrs. Eagar."

"I know, I know, but at the same time——" Rutterthorpe paused, and there was a fretful expression on his face. "It's all very well," he said, "for people

like Marian Eagar; they can afford this sort of thing; they aren't public figures; their living doesn't depend on what the public thinks of them. This'll do me a frightful lot of harm. I'd much rather be out of it."

Merrick did not find it easy to control his patience. He managed to succeed, however. "My dear Mr. Rutterthorpe, you surely must see," he said, "that letter is entered as evidence. It'll be read out in court."

"It doesn't force me to stand in the box, though."

"Does that make any difference?"

Rutterthorpe shrugged his shoulders, and the sly, knowing expression seemed to be about to creep into his smile; it seemed to think better of it, however, and withdrew. "I don't think," he said quietly, "that I'm very anxious to appear." For a minute or two Merrick could not follow the actor's reasoning. When he at last did reach the track of it the implied vanity was so monstrous that he could scarcely believe even Jack Rutterthorpe capable of it.

"Are you trying to tell me," he said, "that while you don't mind being held up before the world as a philanderer with other men's wives, you feel your reputation as the most attractive man in London would be damaged if you confessed that you had made love unsuccessfully?"

Jack Rutterthorpe shifted a little uncomfortably in his chair. He did not care for having things put into words. He replied obliquely:

"Shall we say that I would prefer not to go into the witness box on this occasion?"

The attitude was so grotesque that Merrick could scarcely control his temper. It was unthinkable that this man, simply in order to maintain a reputation among shopgirls as the perfect lover, should be prepared to allow a girl who had been his friend to face false accusations undefended. He could not argue with a man who could take up such an attitude.

"I'm very sorry," he said, "but I'm afraid in this instance we shall be unable to consider your feelings to that extent. In our client's interests we shall have to call you as a witness."

Into Rutterthorpe's face came the cunningly malicious look of a spoilt child whose play is thwarted.

"If you do that," he said, "I can't prevent you. I shall, however, give such evidence as I choose in such manner as I choose. And I shall give to the Judge and public such impressions as I shall choose them to receive. If you care to run the risk of calling such a witness in your defence you do it at your own cost. I thank you, and good-morning."

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There could be no doubt as to what he meant, and it was in a fury of indignation that James Merrick stamped down the passage to his father's room. In such a fury was he that he did not pause to worry over the need of tact, did not wait till his father had looked up from the letter he was writing, did not arrange any suitable setting for his information. He broke straight out into a tirade.

"My lord!" he said, "but in our job one does see human beings in the nude. You meet them at dances and dinner parties, and they seem decent and honest and agreeable, and you think the world must be a pleasant place if it can contain such pleasant people. And then you see them here with their mask down; something's frightened them, something that they value is in danger, and they are like wolves, snarling and vindictive. And you feel that civilization is a show and that we're all wild beasts under our veneer. Heavens, it sickens me!"

He was in such a fury of indignation that he addressed his father as though he were an audience.

"I wonder if we're all like that beneath the surface," he went on. "If we only don't behave as cads because we haven't had the opportunity or the need. I dare say we'ld be all in our different ways the equivalents of that wretched creature if the need goaded us. Cowards. What do you think?"

And he turned interrogatively towards his father, as a schoolmaster turns towards his class. But his father had by now recovered from his astonishment.

"Now, what, my dear James," he said testily, "is all this about?"

"That Eagar divorce suit, Father."

"Then tranquillize yourself and tell me quietly all about it."

Himself, Mr. Merrick was the reverse of tranquil. He fidgeted impatiently as his son spoke, shifting in his chair, tapping his finger nails against the desk,

interrupting with petulant exclamations. His irritability had, however, as always, a calming effect on his son. It was as though James Merrick were saying to himself in sheer perverseness: "Let the old man get worried if he likes. I'll show him that there's nothing here to fluster the restraint of an orderly thinking man." By the time he had finished his explanation he was as urbane as his father was agitated.

"So that's how it stands, Father," he concluded.

"Yes, yes, I see, but really, really, you know, I never wanted to go into this case. It's against all my principles. And now we look like losing it, and that'll do us a lot of harm. A firm like ourselves ought never to be beaten in a divorce suit. We ought never to touch a suit in which the law isn't incontestably on our side."

"But, Father, we haven't lost the case."

"We seem quite likely to. I don't know. I don't know. What your grandfather would have said to all of this I daren't imagine. The law was a gentleman's profession then."

"It still is, Father, only gentlemen behave differently nowadays."

"Do they? I don't know. The men that I meet don't. You'd better send for Bradshaw. He's the man to put us straight over this business. I'm out of my depth, frankly."

And that Benjamin Bradshaw never was.

As James Merrick explained to him the changed conditions of the Eagar case, the gleam of battle came

into his eyes. He was the true man of law. He loved the law in all its complexities, its ramifications, its contradictions. He loved the ferreting into old records, the splitting of hairs, the setting of precedent against precedent. He loved it as one loves a jigsaw puzzle. It existed for him as an abstract science unconnected with human problems, human privileges, human courage. He did not see the Eagar *v.* Eagar suit as a drama on whose outcome depended the intimate happiness of at least two people. He saw it as a "pretty problem." And when it was a question of a "pretty problem" there was no sounder or under certain circumstances more encouraging ally than Benjamin Bradshaw.

For if there was one thing that Bradshaw loathed, it was the straightforward case. The case that could not tax the ingenuity of the legal brain was merely a wasting of precious hours. He was unhappy when he could find no inconsistencies. He loved nothing more than the unearthing of weak points in a will or contract, even if his discoveries were to the disadvantage of his own side. There were times when he was infinitely infuriating. But on such occasions as this he was invaluable. His eyes gleamed, and he rubbed his hands together happily as though the fire of contention were warming his thickened arteries.

"Very pretty," he murmured, "very pretty. I'm afraid our young client has not been by any means discreet."

"There's nothing in it," retorted Merrick.

Bradshaw leant his head drolly on one side.

"The great advantage," he said, "of our profession is that there exists one standard of truth only, the decision of the court. I have every reason to believe that we shall be able to establish as truth the fact of Mrs. Merrick's innocence.

"There is no need," he went on, "for us to be at all alarmed. For a moment it is inevitable that we should feel a trifle flustered. But we must remember that this document of theirs is in the nature of a surprise attack. We had no idea beforehand in which direction the attack was coming. We were off our guard. But we must remember that, while they have launched their complete attack, we have not even begun to reorganize our forces for the counter. And there are one or two little points that occur to me.

"For instance," and his long, lean, hard-nailed finger tapped authoritatively against the table's ledge, "it is all very well for this young actor—what's his name? Let me see—yes, Jack Rutterthorpe—to threaten that he will only give evidence as he chooses and in such manner as he chooses. But he is a young person, I am very sure, whom it would by no means be difficult to frighten in our turn into giving whatever evidence we might wish. He is a young person who is extremely anxious about the impression that he makes before the public. And if we sought carefully I am certain that we could find things about him that he would be far more unwilling to have published in the evening papers than a suggestion that his

skill as the perfect lover was on one solitary occasion insufficient. We shall have no difficulty if we set about things in the right manner in extracting from that young gentleman the exact evidence that we require.

"There is also Mrs. Eagar's evidence. That, I am certain, could be supplemented. We know that he struck her once. But the man who would go to such extreme lengths on one occasion must have shown signs of brutality on others. There must be little things that Mrs. Eagar has forgotten or not thought worth mentioning which would, though trivial in themselves, be extremely valuable as marking the stages that led to the decisive scene. Mrs. Eagar's evidence can and should be supplemented. Those are the two points that leap immediately to my mind in connection with this case. There must of course be others. It will be only a matter of a little thought."

And he smiled blandly and encouragingly upon his principals.

"And that is all that occurs to you at the moment?" asked Mr. Merrick. "Yes? Well, then, we are most grateful to you for your coöperation. I will let you know later what I decide."

The senior partner had listened quietly and attentively to all that his managing clerk had had to say, but the moment that the door had closed behind Bradshaw he turned toward his son with a frown set heavily between his eyes. The testiness, however, had passed. For while Mr. Merrick was fretful about little matters, during the opening of a discussion, he was

invariably calm in the presence of a serious situation. There was a genuine dignity about his post, as he sat back in his chair with his hands linked across its arms.

"This is a bad business, James," he said. "We'll be better out of it."

It was the comment that James Merrick had expected from his father, and both because he was afraid that he might lose his patience in a discussion and because he felt that his position would be stronger if he let his father set forth an argument in which he could subsequently point out the weaknesses, he made no reply.

"It's a bad business," his father said. "As you know, I was opposed at the beginning to our taking up this case. It was only on your insistence that I consented. That, however, is past history. Let the present situation suffice. We are now faced with the necessity of employing blackmail if we are to carry on our suit!"

That was too much for Merrick.

"My dear Father, that's not blackmail," he exclaimed. "It's merely a method of persuading a cad to tell the truth."

"By threatening to divulge some discreditable secret that we shall first have to find out in the grubbiest of manners. That's as near blackmailing as ever I hope to go."

"But surely, Father, he must be made to tell the truth?"

"If that's the only way he can be got to tell it we'ld be better off without it. Besides, how far would it be

the truth? Shouldn't we be holding a pistol at his head and telling him what answers to give to a set of prepared questions?"

"What else does cross-examination by your own counsel amount to ever?"

"That's quibbling, and you know it. It's a dirty case; there's no sense in pretending it isn't. It isn't even as though the matter ended there. There's Mrs. Eagar's evidence. That's got to be supplemented and worked up. She's told her story once, but since it isn't sufficient we must embellish it. How near the truth will it be, do you imagine, before the end? Dirt and lies: that's what the case will be, whichever way the verdict goes. We'ld be better out of it."

It was the decision James Merrick had been waiting for and he tried his hardest to restrain himself. "Father," he said, "I'm sorry: I did not know I was letting you in for a case like this. How could I know that it was going to develop this way? It was a straightforward case when it came first. And it would be a straightforward case now if the other side hadn't started mud-slinging. It's not Mrs. Eagar's fault. And we're in the thing now, anyway."

"There's no need for us to stay in it."

"We can't let a client down."

"We aren't letting a client down. We're merely telling her that the case has developed in such a way that we feel ourselves no longer competent to deal with it and that we are handing it over to the care of a highly trustworthy firm that often works with

us on such occasions. Marshall is a most admirable man in his own line. He will do as well as we could for her, better probably, for he's more familiar with this kind of work. There can be no question of letting a client down."

Merrick's hands were behind his back, and he clenched them tightly upon one another in a fierce attempt at restraint. The picture of Marian, so young and helpless in this maze of litigation, being handed over to indifferent strangers, to be treated as a pawn in a game, was beyond speech pathetic. At all costs that must be prevented. It was only with an effort, however, that he managed to control his voice.

"Not let her down?" he said. "My dear Father, how can you pretend it won't? What impression but one can it make on the other side? They'll imagine that we're beaten and have flung in our hand."

Mr. Merrick shook his head. "Ephraim is not a fool. He knows the traditions of this firm. He will realize at once why we have decided to pass on the management of the case to Marshall."

"But Mrs. Eagar won't. She's a kid. She'll just think we've flung over her case the moment it grew difficult."

"That is a point, my boy, that I cannot discuss with you, for I cannot know, since I have not met Mrs. Eagar. This, however, I can assure you: Never could I allow the feelings of a private person to hinder me from doing what I believed to be my duty to the honour and tradition of the firm."

It was more than James Merrick could stand. The successive interviews with Rutterthorpe and Bradshaw and now with his father had placed a heavy strain on him, and he was desperate at the thought that Marian's case might be taken out of his control and given into the hands of strangers. If that were to happen, he would never dare look her in the face again. She had trusted him and he would have failed her. He was desperate. And it was desperately that he spoke in anger.

"The honour and tradition of the firm," he cried. "And because of them a young and helpless woman is to be sacrificed! And what are they, this honour, this tradition? Other people's opinions: what other people are going to say about us. It's all on a par: everything to be sacrificed to our vanity. No regard for truth or decency or loyalty. Nobody asking what's right, what's true, what's decent. Just what are others going to think of me? How shall I appear? First of all there's Rutterthorpe refusing to tell the truth, because he's afraid that a lot of servant girls won't think him so marvellous as he had duped them into believing him. And now you're afraid that a few stuffy old solicitors will shake their heads in their stuffy clubs. And for that a decent woman's to be sacrificed! Heavens, it sickens me."

He spoke wildly, hysterically. But his father made no retort. He sat calm and dignified and silent in his chair, his eyes fixed solemnly upon his son. Even when Merrick paused, his father remained silent. And it was

this silence that recalled James Merrick to an appreciation of what had passed. And as he appreciated he gasped in the same way that a drunken man does when cold water has been soused over him. Had it been really he who had said these things—and to his own father?

"I'm s-sorry," he stammered. "I lost my head. I did-didn't know what I was saying. I'm sorry."

His father did not relax his attitude of dignity.

"I quite understand," he said. "I did not know you felt as strongly about the matter. You are a partner in this firm and you have a right to your opinion. There is no need to discuss the matter further. We will continue with the case."

There was not the slightest accent of reproach in his tone, and as so often happens after one has gained one's point at the cost of friction, James Merrick felt ashamed and regretful. His father would not listen, however, to the explanation of apology he began to stammer out.

"That is all right, my boy," he said. "I understand." And he turned back towards the letter on which he had been engaged when his son had burst impetuously into the room.

In an oddly compounded mood James Merrick walked back to his own room. He did not quite know how he felt. To have spoken to his own father like that, to a father who had been so good a friend to him! Such a thing had never happened in his life before, never would happen again, he trusted; it had

been disgraceful and undignified and unworthy. But at the same time unless he had made that scene would he have been able to prevent Marian's case from being handed over to the management of a stranger? Of two evils had he chosen the lesser or the greater? Of two loyalties could he have saved one without treachery to the other?

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It was this aspect of the situation that he held most clearly before his mind as in the solitude of his own room he faced the problem that was now before him. One couldn't make omelettes without smashing eggs. And he was launched upon a course that could lead apparently to nothing else. The fight had started, and life was not like a football match. There were no fixed rules. You might fight clean, but you had to fight unless you were going under. And the longer the fight lasted, the tenser the bitterness of it became. As a lawyer he had watched the process often. People had come into his office quite friendlily disposed towards those from whom they sought redress. They did not want to fight, they wanted things settled amicably without bad blood, but always it came to the same thing. Evil instincts were roused. Men grew vindictive and acrimonious. It became a fight. Something in the process of the law, something intrinsic in its nature, in its very definition of the other party as opponents, insisted that it should be a fight. It was a process that he had watched many times before, but

from the outside and with detachment. This was the first time that his own emotions had been involved, and he viewed with horror the prospect of such a bitter fight as this case gave every prospect of becoming. He loathed the idea of seeing Marian involved in such a business. Was it too late, he wondered, to prevent it? When one looked back at a case one was usually forced to recognize that there had been a point before the rival parties had become too fatally involved when diplomatic intervention had been possible. The point once passed, the thing grew out of hand. Had, though, that point been passed? Might there not still be a chance of averting the catastrophe of this contention?

If only, he thought, there were some go-between; some mediator who could put the matter to Eagar quietly. Eagar was a decentish sort of fellow really. He could be made to see, surely, the criminal folly of contesting such a case. There was nothing to be gained, everything to be lost. If only a mediator could have explained, as he himself could have explained had he been a detached and unimplicated spectator, the inevitable consequences of this counter charge. He was certain that the right mediator could woo Eagar back to reason.

Where, though, was that mediator to be found? He knew scarcely any of Eagar's friends. No one, anyhow, in whom he could place the slightest trust. He was in the dark, utterly in the dark. If only he could go himself!

The idea was, of course, preposterous. To call upon

an opponent's client. It was as bad as a barrister visiting a solicitor. It was the sort of thing for which one might be reported to the law society. It was not merely a breach of professional etiquette. It was the violation of every tradition of legal practice. He could imagine the letter of protest that Ephraim would delight in writing to his father; could imagine his father's stupefied indignation, his refusal to believe that his son could be capable of such conduct: realized, too, the immense damage that such an act would do his firm, could hear the gossip of other solicitors. "Oh, Merrick, Hay and Merrick, they're the people who send salaried partners to call on other people's clients"; could hear the contemptuous titter round the table. It was unthinkable, of course, utterly unthinkable. One just couldn't do a thing like that. One couldn't.

And yet, and yet . . .

If only the facts could be presented reasonably to Eagar, he was so sure, so very sure, that this calamity might be avoided. And who was to present those facts if not himself?

With an impatient jerk he pushed his chair back from the desk, rose to his feet, and began to walk with long swinging strides backwards and forwards across the room. Suppose, after all, that he were to go, suppose that he were to outrage every tradition of his calling, how did the balance stand? On the one hand there was the damage he would do himself: if Ephraim got to know, as in all likelihood he would, it would be scarcely possible for his father to keep

him in the office. In no other way could the firm retain its reputation and position. In self-defence and self-justification they would have to make an example of him. That was the one side of balance and on the other there was the possibility of success: the possibility of Eagar listening to reason, of refusing to defend the suit, of letting the petition through; which would mean no scandal, no disgrace for him, and for Marian a clean passage through the muddied waters of the courts. That, with the chances of success and failure evenly matched, was how the balance stood. His future or Marian's good name. One of them had to be risked.

And as he paced backwards and forwards up and down his room, all that was practical and calculating in his nature counselled him against his recklessness. "Think twice," murmured the voice of worldly wisdom. "For heaven's sake think twice, consider everything that you'll be risking. Your work, your future, your position: all that your position as a personable and well-situated, well-connected bachelor in London means. Think of all that that position brings you: the friendships, the sport, the hospitality, the chance of meeting amusing people in the most congenial of settings. You've valued that, haven't you? You've had moods when London's wearied you, when you've said that you'ld give anything to be out of it; but they've only been moods now, haven't they? You've liked seeing your diary black with engagements and your mantelpiece littered with invitation cards. You'ld miss

it, wouldn't you, if it all went? And it would go, the moment you left your father's firm, the moment you found your background gone. You're risking a good deal; and for what? For a woman you've known six weeks, of whom you know nothing, with whom you're not in love, even. Come, now, be sensible, is it worth it? Is she worth it? You remember what your father said the first time you spoke to him about the case: 'One of those modern women with no sense of their responsibilities, who give nothing and expect everything.' You were very indignant when he called her that. But how can you be sure he wasn't right? Look what a wife she's been to Eagar. Selfish, mischievous, exacting. You don't want to get mixed up with that sort of woman. She'ld be a fearful nuisance. Keep clear of her while you've got the chance. There's nothing but strain and worry to be got from her. She's exciting: let's admit that. But it isn't worth it, those few moments at such a cost."

Very softly, very persuasively the voice of worldly wisdom pleaded. But in the other side of the scale was Marian, with her red-brown hair and laughing eyes and husky voice. Marian's freshness and Marian's wilfulness, and the picture of Marian in the witness box undergoing the ignominious ordeal of cross-examination. His future or Marian's good name. There was no doubt which side of the scale was weighed the heavier.

"I'm doing a mad thing," he thought, "very nearly a criminal thing. A thing that two months ago I

should have thought it impossible for any decent solicitor to do." Nor could he persuade himself that the chance of success justified the risk. He remembered the spirit of that last interview of his with Eagar. And several weeks had passed since then, several weeks during which the acid of aggression had bitten deep into Eagar's spirit. It was a forlorn enterprise. But he had to make it. He would never forgive himself afterwards if he was left with the knowledge that he might at one point have saved the situation but had been too cowardly to run the risk of an experiment.

It was an insane attempt, no doubt, but the hour for desperate remedies had come.

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He did not ring up first for an appointment. He was afraid that it might be refused him, or that Eagar would insist on his saying what he had to say across the telephone; and as he sent up his card he was uncertain whether he would be received. Technically he should not be. But he hoped that the same spirit of curiosity that had led him two months earlier to receive Eagar would make Eagar now anxious to hear what he had to say.

It did apparently.

But as he walked into the bleak, sparsely furnished office room and saw Eagar, his face stern and unreceptive, standing beside his chair, one hand at his side, the other tapping a penholder, he felt to the full the

hopelessness of his mission. And as he sat down in the stiff chair that Eagar had pointed out to him he was acutely conscious of the disadvantage that one is at when one is interviewing a man in his own office.

As he had expected, Eagar waited for him to begin.

"You know what I've come about," he said. "This is a bad business."

Eagar made no comment. He had not invited the conference. It was for the other man to justify it. For that Merrick had come prepared.

"It's a bad business," he said. "And it can only get worse as it goes on. I don't know what your experience of litigation is; mine isn't big, but it's enough for me to guess into what kind of a mess this case must grow. There'll be charges and counter charges. The thing's only starting now. It'll grow and grow. It'll be the sort of case that'll fill the columns of the Sunday papers. It'll be something that'll take years of living down. Nobody'll be any the better off for it." He paused. But Eagar showed no readiness to argue.

"Are you offering to withdraw the suit?" he asked.

"No."

"Then what is it that you're suggesting?"

Merrick delayed his reply a second. He had talked so much that day. He was weary of discussion. He was uncertain how best to approach this man, so different in ideas and upbringing from himself. He decided finally on the kind of man-to-man appeal that house masters are supposed to make to their head prefects.

"Look here, Eagar, what's the point of stirring up all this mud?" he said. "Why damage both yourself and her? Why not let the thing go through quietly?"

It did not take. Eagar simply laughed.

"Let it go through quietly," he said. "I like that! You file a petition against me. You draw up a lot of charges, and then, when I defend myself, you get frightened and ask me to be chivalrous and back out."

"It isn't that."

"What is it, then?"

"Simply that you and your wife are on the verge of making about the biggest mistake that two people can. You don't know what you're letting yourselves in for. I do. If you'd known what it was going to be like at the beginning, you'ld never have started it. And now, because you are once in, you feel that you must carry on. And you'll let yourselves be carried on. It's like an avalanche going downhill. Nothing can stop it after a certain point. And in a few months' time the papers will be full of the kind of case which makes other folk wonder how people with any self-respect can drag their private lives in that way before the public. And that day you'll be wondering yourselves how it can have happened."

He spoke so quietly, so sincerely, that Eagar, in spite of himself, was impressed.

"I dare say, I dare say," he said, and Merrick could see that he was wavering. "But what it amounts to, after all, is this: that I'm to let myself be shot at and Marian's to get off scot-free."

"If it's to be undefended you won't be shot at, it'll go through very quietly and very quickly. As likely as not it won't be reported. At the most there'll be no more than a paragraph."

"Perhaps; but everyone I know—and that's all that counts, isn't it? the people that one knows—will believe that I'm an unfaithful husband and a bully. That's not very pretty, is it? And you come here and ask me to take it lying down; to let it go through quietly so that Marian's name shan't be damaged. For that's what it amounts to: my name's got to be damaged anyhow. And hers needn't be. So I'm to be sacrificed. That's what it's been all through. That's what her idea of being a wife is. A woman who's given way to in everything. And she had her way, too, in most things. So she thought she would in this. She imagined, like all these women of her class seem to nowadays, that the mere fact of being a woman entitles them to all the pleasures and privileges of life without placing them under any obligations to give anything in return. That's how she's behaved all the way. It'll do her good to learn that there's a limit to that game."

His voice had risen and his cheeks had flushed, and Merrick's heart had sunk as he had listened to him. For a moment at the very beginning he had detected signs of wavering. But Eagar had brooded too long over the injustice that he had felt to have been done to him. The venom had gone too deep. He felt himself to be an ill-used and persecuted man: he could

no longer see the case in true perspective. The moment he began to discuss it he must lose his temper and his head. Merrick felt his task to be hopeless, but he continued.

"That may or may not be true," he said. "I'm naturally not in a position to judge. It's never any use going back over the past. What we've got to do is to take the situation as it stands and try and see how it can be got out of with the least pain to everyone. A fight can only damage everyone. And if you don't like the idea of the case appearing as it is now it would be easy enough to change the charge to one of desertion. No one would think any the worse of you for that."

It was a suggestion that earlier in the case might have been made successfully, but again Eagar merely laughed.

"So that's your tack now, is it?" he said. "Marian knew quite well to begin with that I should never agree to one of those collusive desertion cases. So she trumped up that ridiculous cruelty charge. When she sees it doesn't work she switches across and asks me to be chivalrous and desert her. No, no, Merrick. You ask me what I'm hoping to get out of this case, which is going to cost me a great deal of money and mix me up in a great deal of scandal. In reply I assure you that I'm not going to sit quiet and let anyone take my good name away. Marian's frightened. Well, let her be. She started this. If anyone's to draw out of it, she can."

"And let your marriage stand?"

"I'm well enough content with it."

Merrick looked marvelling at him. "Do you really believe," he said, "that after all this, feeling about her as you do, there can be any happiness for you together?"

Eagar shrugged his shoulders. "These are early days yet," he said. "We've got a long while ahead of us. This should be a lesson to her, it'll teach her sense. She'll make quite a decent wife, I dare say, before I'm through with her." Then his face clouded, and the ugly, vindictive look came back into it. "It'll be the hell of a fine lesson for her. She thought she could do any damned thing with me she liked. She'll know she can't now."

It was useless to prolong the talk. With a sick heart Merrick turned away. The fight would have to go through, and it would grow squalider week by week. What was it about the law that everything it touched it must befoul? Could it leave nothing clean? He recalled the Herbert Eagar he had met two months back, a decent, simple fellow, sincerely worried because his wife had left him, anxious to make amends, wanting her back because he loved her. And now there was this other Eagar, tyrannical and spiteful, fighting for the mere sake of fighting, wanting his wife back so that he might be revenged on her. A dirty business. And yet it had been clean enough to start with. He remembered Marian's recoil from the idea of bringing the cruelty charge in court. That

was how one always felt at the beginning, and then the mosquito of contention stung you, and you lost your sense of what was and was not decent. You were in a fight. You took the weapon that lay handiest. A thing was good evidence or bad evidence. And your managing clerk regretted that a man had not been more of a cad than he had been, that he had not struck a woman with his clenched fist. And you quarrelled with your father. And now he was on his way to Marian to decide what further counter accusations could be brought against her husband. And his heart was heavy, and the lovely summer evening mocked him with its peace and beauty. The contrast was so acute.

Everything around him was so lovely. The pale blue of the sky, whitened where the sharp outline of chimney pot and gable cut it; the pale sky with the soft dove-coloured clouds drifting across it lazily; and the sun growing redder and larger as it sank and the light lying almost level along the grass between the trees; and the leaves upon the branches greeny-gold; and the young people walking slowly side by side across the park; and the big shops closing, and Piccadilly thronged with people hurrying home to their gardens and tennis courts and rivers; to white flannels and the soft Northern twilight, to the approach of night and the slow silencing of the birds. On all sides of him peace and beauty and in his heart heaviness and gain-giving. "He saw the road and where it led." There would be weeks of anxiety and strain, the

mustering of fresh charges, the countering of an opponent's moves, the conferences with counsel, the slow marshalling of an attack.

And then the scene in court, with the room packed, and the gallery twittering with prurient curiosities, and the reporters busy with their pencils, and Marian in the witness box enduring the ordeal of a cross-examination, making heaven knew what impression there. He remembered what impression she had made upon him at that first party. Wanton and wild, that was how he had seen her. He remembered his father's comment on her, the typical modern girl, a mistress and not a wife. And how else would the public see her, under the light of that ruthless cross-examination? The questions that would beset her, the questions to which her conduct had made her liable. A girl who kissed lightly, who dined alone in men's flats, had baths even in men's flats. Even if she won her case, what reputation would be left her? He could picture the headlines across the evening papers, the jokes in music halls. It would take her years to live it down. And that Marian should be subject to that—Marian!

He had told her little of the case's recent developments, not wishing to worry her till it was strictly necessary, and he found her awaiting him in the pleasant two-roomed service flat that she had taken temporarily, gaily expectant of a happy evening. And as he saw her curled happily into the corner of a chesterfield he winced at the mental picture of her stand-

ing in a few weeks' time in the corner of a witness box. It was one of those things that one just couldn't bear to picture.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that I've bad news for you."

And he explained to her what had been happening during the last few weeks, told her of her husband's counter charges, of his interview with Rutterthorpe, the conference between Bradshaw and his father and his vain attempt at a reconciliation with her husband.

As he began to describe his interview with her husband Marian looked up quickly.

"What?" she said. "You've been to see my husband? But wasn't that fearfully unprofessional?"

He laughed.

"It was rather, I suppose."

"Not more than rather?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Rather is a relative term," he said.

She looked at him curiously.

"Not more than rather," she repeated. "But isn't it the kind of thing that you might get into pretty serious trouble over if it got found out?"

"It won't be found out unless your husband tells his solicitors."

"And is he likely to?"

Again Merrick shrugged his shoulders. Under the strain of his talk with Eagar, teased by the bitterness of defeat, he had almost forgotten to consider what might be for himself the consequences of that defeat.

"How likely," Marian persisted, "is Herbert to tell his solicitors?"

"The betting, I should say, was fifty-fifty."

"And if he does tell, how serious would it be for you?"

He hesitated, then smiled and rather charmingly, "Quite serious," he said.

"It might make trouble for you with your father?"

"Yes."

"So much trouble that you might have to leave his firm?"

"Possibly."

"Probably" would have been the correcter answer. He did not see, indeed, how he could hope to be retained after so deplorable a betrayal of trust. Almost certainly, if Eagar spoke to Ephraim, he would have to go. And that would mean the leaving of Marian alone with no one but Bradshaw and his father to protect her interests. It was the first time he had seen it from that angle. Marian alone. It might be, he reflected bitterly, that his recklessness had done no more for Marian than hand her over to the care of those who took no more than a detached and legal interest in her. It might be that because of it she was worse off than she had been before. A sorry business.

But her eyes, clear and searching, were fixed upon him.

"You knew that," she said, "and yet you went."

She spoke slowly, incredulously, as though she were speaking her thoughts aloud. She hesitated as though

there were more that she had to say; then suddenly, as though she had changed her mind, "Please tell me the rest," she said.

He told her, and she listened quietly, leaning forward on the sofa, her elbows upon her knees, her hands stretched out in front of her. When he had finished she looked up; her eyes thoughtful and her forehead creased.

"And now," she said, "you want me to give you something that will make my evidence seem stronger. But I don't see how I can. There wasn't anything."

The look in her eyes was puzzled and appealing. And it was that look that made up Merrick's mind for him. As his eyes met hers, as he realized all that that look implied of innocence and freshness, he knew very well that he could never allow her to be dragged through the ignominy of such a case as this. She was clean now and she must remain so. She must not be smirched by contact with a mind like Bradshaw's; the long interviews, during which Bradshaw's questioning would dive into her past, searching out grievances, poisoning her thoughts, placing new constructions on ignored moments, making her, as Ephraim had made her husband, spiteful and ruthless and vindictive, leaving her for the rest of her life possibly with a warped and envenomed attitude towards the world. Day by day he would be watching the destruction of something fine and clean. And he couldn't. That was all there was to it, he couldn't.

"If I could think of anything," Marian was say-

ing, "of course I'ld tell you, I'ld have told you at the beginning, but there really wasn't anything. Apart from that one occasion, and then perhaps he'd been drinking, I don't know, he was pretty patient with me."

Merrick smiled to himself as he imagined how Bradshaw would have parried that admission. He would have rubbed his hands together, cocked his head over on one side. "Yes, yes," he would have answered, "but let's go back over it all carefully. Are you sure, are you quite sure, that there wasn't, I don't say such an incident as the one you have told us of, but some occasion when he was a little rough, a little abrupt, shall we say, with you?" And he would ferret about, stirring up old animosities, like a dentist probing a decayed tooth until he strikes the nerve. That would have been Bradshaw's game. Well, it should not be his.

"You needn't worry about that," he said. "There won't be any need to rake up old quarrels."

She raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"I thought," she said, "that you'd come round to see if I couldn't remember some new evidence for you."

"I came round to tell you what had happened, to tell you what was my father's view of it, what our managing clerk had thought of it."

"Just that. Not to find new evidence?"

"No."

"Then you think we shall be able to win the case without?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he said. "We might win it, we might not. That's not the point: the point is how much we'd lose either way."

She looked at him curiously, a puzzling, interrogative expression on her face. "I don't follow," she said slowly. "If it's a question of money, I suppose it would cost a lot, but I don't mind selling out capital."

Merrick smiled. "It's not that," he said. "It's not a question of money."

He was sitting beside her on the sofa, and leaning forward he took one of her hands in his, and as he spoke in a low, quiet voice, his fingers stroked softly the smooth, soft palm. "Money's nothing to do with it," he said. "I don't know how much the case would cost; anyhow, it would be your husband that would be paying for it. I don't know whether you'ld win or lose it. That's neither way. What I do know is this: that if I allowed you to go on with this case I'ld never forgive myself."

Marian started. "Not go on with it!"

"I should never, never forgive myself if I let you."

"Although you'ld be making quite a considerable amount of money out of it?"

"Quite."

"And although there's quite a reasonable chance that I should win?"

"Quite."

"Isn't that rather curious advice, then, for a solicitor to give a client?"

"I don't think of you in that way, as just a client."

She laughed, a little nervously, but she made no attempt to withdraw her hand. Instead she seemed to lean a little nearer to him.

"Then how do you think of me?" she said.

Her face, so lovely and so flowerlike, so wilful and so wistful, was very close to his, but the time had not come to answer her question otherwise than obliquely. "My dear," he said, and as he spoke her fingers folded themselves twiningly over his, "I've not been in this business very long, but I've been in it long enough to know what the law's like and what the law does to people. You will hear it said, I know, that doctors and lawyers are vultures preying on the unsuspecting layman. That doctors make diseases where there aren't any, and lawyers make quarrels where there aren't any. And I dare say that in the past I've been like a lot of others. If people have come to me wanting to fight I've let them fight. They didn't know what they were letting themselves in for and I did. But one must live. If people have got to learn a lesson they might as well learn it to my profit rather than to someone else's. And I dare say that if this were an ordinary case I should feel I'd done my duty when I'd explained to my client the type of publicity that she'd got to look for. If she was prepared for it, I'ld be content to let her carry on. It should be her lookout, I'ld say. But, Marian, when it's a question of you, I just can't think that way."

The fingers that were twined about his contracted

and "No?" her lips whispered, so faintly that scarcely more than a breath was passed between them.

"If it were the case of anybody else," said Merrick, "I would shrug my shoulders about it all. But I can't stand by and see you get drawn into a thing like this. There's no such thing as a clean fight. And I'm not going to let you stand in the witness box and have put to you the questions that the cheap Sunday papers will reprint to be sniggered over by servant girls; I'm not going to have you made the subject of taproom limericks. I'm not going to see your photograph with cheap captions under it reprinted all over England; so that you would be afraid to walk in the streets for fear of being recognized, so that whenever you left a room you would be wondering what they would start saying about you the instant you were away; so that you would grow suspicious and self-conscious and distrustful. For this is the kind of case that the reporters would leap at: the kind of case that would make that of you. All that evidence about taking baths in a man's flat, can't you see the opportunities that that would give them?"

He had begun by speaking quietly, but he felt too strongly to restrain the pitch and eagerness of his voice; his eyes were bright and his cheeks flushed as he concluded.

"Then you are advising me," she said, "to let the marriage stand?"

It was the same question that he had set to Eagar, but it was only now, with the softness of her hand

in his, and in his ears the softness of her voice, and before his eyes that face ordinarily so gay but now so pensive, that he realized the full implication of that question, realized to the full why it was that it was impossible for him in Marian's case to stand by and shrug his shoulders as he would in that of anybody else; why he could not let her, as he would have any other client, fight her way to the ignominy of the witness box. Let the marriage stand, let her go back to Eagar, out of his own life forever? That was as unthinkable a picture as that other one of Marian in the box, with the questions of the opposing counsel throwing their net about her, with the pencils of the reporters scraping across paper; with the placards of the evening papers shrieking her personality across a world.

"No, no," he cried, "not that!"

"My dear, what else is there?"

He did not hesitate. He saw the issue clearly. She must not be allowed to fight the case; and to return to her husband, to go out of his life forever, that too was an impossibility. There was, though, a third alternative.

"There are other ways than that," he said. "You'll drop your case, but it won't be so that you can go back to your husband. It'll be to go away and out of England, to where you can be free and lead the life you choose, and while you're away he can divorce you, and it'll be very quiet and there'll be no talk; and when

you come back everyone will have forgotten all about it."

He spoke softly but in a way jestingly; and as he spoke he played with her fingers delicately, as though they were a toy, as though it were a game that they were playing. And she responded to his mood.

"A divorce," she said. "But mustn't there be a co-respondent first?"

"I wasn't suggesting that you should go alone."

They spoke laughingly, but the light in their eyes was tender; they knew each other well enough to be able to talk in shorthand.

"My dear," she said, and though her lips were smiling they were trembling, "this is rather a serious matter. Are you quite sure that you're as much in love as that?"

And though his lips too were smiling, his fingers were no longer playing with hers but were tight clasped upon them, and though he tried to speak lightly there was a break in his voice.

"Love," he said, "but that's such a fearfully feeble word." Hard as he tried he couldn't make it sound offhand. And it was with half a laugh and half a sob that she turned to him to teach him how little a thing in truth were those kisses that she had scattered down the past so lightly.

★

They dined that evening at Gramati's, the first restaurant where they had dined together, and the long narrow room with its painted panels and quaint

ceiling was friendly and welcoming, and the thin dyspeptic waiter beamed on them and led them to their favourite table in the right-hand corner opposite the door, and they ordered as they had on that other evening minestrone and fritto misto, and zabaglione, and they drank the same powerful and slightly soured Barola. But on this night of nights the rough wine seemed singularly rich and full, and never had fritto misto seemed a more happily compounded blending of varying flavours, and everybody in the room seemed happy; there was a smile on everybody's face, and in the street outside an organ was crunching gaily, and there did not seem to be such a thing as unhappiness beneath the sky. And beneath the table their feet were touching, and now and again his fingers would stretch out to hers; and their eyes would meet, glowing and radiant eyes, as they exchanged the confidences of a love that can at last confess its name.

"I wonder what we should have thought," he said, "if someone had told us on that first evening that one day we should come to mean this to one another."

And she smiled enchantingly. "I always thought," she said, "that we were going to be good friends."

"Even after that party?"

She laughed at that. "Even after that party," she said. "I felt sure that if we were to meet we should find it quite easy to make things up. And I felt certain we should meet. And I knew that it would be if anything a bond between us; something for us to laugh over. I understood, you see. I was cross, because

it seemed such a pity, because you were spoiling things, and it was so silly of you to be spoiling things. But I understood."

And they laughed over that old, that foolish misunderstanding.

And he asked her when she had first begun to wonder whether one day she might not come to fall in love with him. And she leant forward across the table, her cheek rested between her hands.

"I don't know," she said. "It's been odd. I don't know that I ever did, not properly. I've just gone on day after day; now and again I've asked myself whether we were in love; it was really all so different from what one expects it to be. There was never any moment when I said to myself, 'Look, you're in love.' I just gradually came to know I was. There've never been any marked stages. Even now I don't feel there's been any change. It's as though automatically the next thing there was to happen's happened."

And sitting there at her side, with his knees touching gently against hers, he wondered whether all their life together it might not be like that: a gentle flowing of one mood into another: a gradual deepening, a gradual growth through the slow stages of maturity. Which was perhaps why they had not come earlier to an avowing of their love. They had known themselves to be part of a long process; they had known they could afford to wait. When it was the case of a light brief loving, the opportunity would pass if you did not snatch at it in the same way that in a

quarter-mile race you could not make up lost ground. But you started slowly when you were entered for a Marathon. And perhaps it was because they had been so sure of one another, so sure that they had been destined for one another, that they had not known those agonies of insecurity by which most lovers are beset, the jealous terror of those hours when they are apart, when they wonder whether others' hands may not be upon the prize they have delayed to seize, the terror that makes of most courtships a restless and tormented time. They had had no need for that. They would be such friends, they would be such lovers. They would be all-sufficient for one another. They would go to parties and theatres, they would dance and travel. They would have plenty of friends, their door would be always open. But parties and hospitality and distractions would not be as they were to most people, avenues of escape from the boredom of an unsatisfying life; they would be jolly things that she and he could share together, and the best moment would always be when it was all over and they were alone and they turned to one another and laughed and said, "Wasn't it fun, what did you make of it all?" He was impatient to begin his sharing of all things with her.

"We'll go away soon," he pleaded, "very soon, quite soon." And her eyes were glowing.

"The moment you call," she answered.

"That'll be as soon," he told her, "as you can get your trunks packed."

"And where shall we go?" she asked him. And he smiled wooingly.

"Somewhere very quiet; somewhere strange and foreign, where neither of us has ever been; where neither of us will know a soul; where we can exist in and for each other."

And he paused. And there came a dreaming look into his eyes, a dreaming note into his voice. And, "I remember," he went on, "when I was an undergraduate going for a Mediterranean cruise, and I remember waking one morning early, a few moments before dawn, and coming up on deck and looking out southward towards Africa; all the previous day we had been near the coast. It had been red and parched and desolate, a wearying day; but that morning it was all very clear and cool and quiet, and the sea was blue, far bluer than the sky, and the sun was rising, and across the water its rays were striking, it seemed only a few yards away, on a little climbing town, a Spanish town, and the houses looked so white and clean and cool, and I thought that life there and the people that lived there must be clean and cool and quiet too, and I thought that I would go there one day, and I turned to one of the sailors and, 'What's the name of that place?' I asked him, and 'Tangiers' he told me."

And as he spoke there rose very visibly before his memory the picture of that early morning, its peace and beauty and tranquillity; but more vividly still, effacing the other picture, the forecast of what of

life there might be there for him and Marian. The marvel of that picture. The peace and beauty and tranquillity of a life that love had sweetened, and strengthened, and made deep: a forecast so lovely that he drew such a deep breath as one draws when looking for the first time over some unimagined prospect. And at his side Marian sighed softly.

"It won't be my fault," she said, "if you're not happy."

So they sat talking there and dreaming of all that they would make of their life together, till long after the last diner had left the restaurant, and the waiters had begun in protest to pile the cleared tables into a heap in preparation for the morning's sweeping.

V

"And first thing to-morrow I shall tell my father."

With those words Merrick had waved good-bye to her from the step of the hansom cab as she had stood silhouetted in the doorway of her flat, her fingers lifted to lips that were still warm from kisses, but before the morning had advanced many minutes he recognized very clearly that only news of the most propitious nature could be divulged at such a moment and nothing in his experience of his father's nature could lead him to suppose that his father would see in such a light the news that was to be broken to him. He had not worked for four years in Lincoln's Inn without learning that there were certain mornings when such subjects as advance of salary, protracted week-end leave, parental guarantees of overdraft were better postponed till food and wine had mellowed a perturbed spirit. One glance at his father's face as he passed in the passage was sufficient to warn him that this was not the morning on which it would be prudent to announce anything more alarming than some vastly profitable transference of title deeds. "I think," was his decision, "that I should be well ad-

vised to dine at home to-night." And taking a telegraph form from his desk he wrote to Marian a long and facetious telegram. The kind of telegram, full of personal railleries, that lovers send to one another. He wrote to her as though he were a reporter describing a cricket match, whose start had had to be postponed owing to bad weather. And he smiled to himself as he pictured the spirit in which she would receive the telegram. His passion for cricket had been always cause for mockery and taunts. "It'll make her smile," he predicted. "Anyhow, it'll give her an excuse to ring me up for an explanation." Which it did, to the dislocation for half an hour of the firm's transactions.

"If you mention cricket to me again," she concluded laughingly, "I'll divorce you within two hours of our marriage."

And he smiled to himself, thinking how little cricket, how little any of the things that had formerly comprised his life, mattered to him now. How easily he could dispense with any of them.

And it was so differently that he had thought of marriage in the days before he had known Marian. He had always pictured himself ultimately as being married; to someone in his own world, who would share his interests and his friendships, who would give him a background. He had never conceived it as anything desperately romantic. He would be in love with her, of course. But then love was something that he had seen always as a sideshow, as a flavouring to life, as something that fitted or did not fit into the picture.

It was the picture that mattered: the composite life composed of work and games, of tastes and friendships and ambitions. His marriage was to be something that would stabilize and complete that framework. He had never imagined that there would come a time when it would be his relationship with a woman that would comprise that framework, and that of the other things he would find use only for such ones as could find place for themselves upon that framework. Which was in truth how he was feeling now. It was his life with Marian that mattered. Other things—his work, his friends, his play—could group themselves round that relationship as they chose. Never in the self-confident course of his twenty-seven years had he faced the future with less misgiving.

★

Much, however, of his calm deserted him as he rang that evening at the bell of his father's house. It was not, after all, such an easy matter that he had to speak of. In the intoxication of his delight he had scarcely realized how opposed this marriage of his would be to every tradition for which his parents stood. He had been pacing a dream continent, from which he was recalled to actuality by the massive brasswork of the knocker at which as a child he had gazed with such awestruck eyes. It was so formal and so familiar. Rogers opening the door and seeming no older and no fatter than he had in those days when

he had welcomed Merrick home from school, smiling and bending forward just as he had always done. "Good-evening, Mr. James. It's a long while since we have had the pleasure of seeing you." The old formula, the master changed to mister. That was the only difference. And the wide, heavily banistered staircase, so typical of Victorian solidity. And his mother, a gray and wan figure, with a gray shawl draped about her shoulders, rising from her straight-backed chair, putting down her spectacles, her face momentarily aglow with pleasure.

"Darling, how nice to see you! And you're staying the night, aren't you?"

He shook his head. He had to be back at his flat for the morning's post, he told her; and her face was shadowed with disappointment. "I'd been so hoping," she said. "Still, it's nice to have this much of you. Now come and tell me all that you've been doing."

It was all rather oddly moving. He supposed that life must be rather drab now for his mother, with her eldest son in India, and himself at the other end of London, with no current of young life moving through the house, and her husband too tired in the evenings to care greatly for entertainment. One day must be very like another for her. She would be so happy to see him married to the kind of girl she would have chosen for him, with grandchildren to make life fresh and new for her. It was a pity things had not gone that way, that Marian had not been free when they had met, that they could not have had a court-

ship and a wedding in keeping with the traditions of his house. Announcements in the *Morning Post*, photographs in the weekly papers, visits to relations; all the fun and excitement of a wedding: the bridesmaids, the presents, the champagne. And afterwards, when they were back from their honeymoon, a jolly housewarming in one of those quiet houses in a quiet square, which are the secret and the life of London; and people asking them out, and everyone happy and glad about it. That was the kind of marriage he should have had. It was a pity for his mother's sake that he could not have had it.

And as the evening passed this sense of disloyalty to tradition deepened. The setting of that family dinner: the heavy walnut table; the heavy silver candlesticks; the trencher of venison; the shadowed room with the gleam of its gilt-framed portraits glimmering on the panelled walls, was marvellously typical of the prosperity and solidity of Victorian life in the upper middle classes. It had all been so solid and respectable; the large nurseries, the sense of obligations, the resolve of each son in turn to build for himself a house the exact replica of, though a little larger than, his father's.

It was not quite so drab, of course, that Victorian era, as it had been painted. There had been the traditional years of a young man's wild oats: the gaming and the drinking and the wandering in places where he would never be embarrassed by chance encounters with his sister's friends. The worlds did not mix as

they do now. But the wild oats sown and the debts settled and the ledgers cast, there was the prudent solid marriage, the creation and support of property, and a sound Conservative voting at the polls. That was the world to which his father had been bred; the world in which he had expected his son to take his place. Just how much of a shock, Merrick wondered, would it be for them when they learnt the truth? He was not particularly looking forward to the ordeal of his confession. It was as well, he reflected, that his father's Burgundy was of a fortifying nature.

He contrived, however, to make his voice sound offhand.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that I've got some rather disquieting news for you."

His mother, who was the victim of many terrors, looked up from her sewing quickly.

"Oh, my dear, you're not ill?" she cried. "You haven't got to have an operation?"

"Nothing as serious as that."

"It's debt, then. You've got into the hands of moneylenders. Dear one, how foolish of you!"

Merrick stretched out his hand and patted her knee gently.

"Nothing so alarming as that, my dear. It's just that I'm going to get married. No, no," he added hastily, as he saw his mother's face flush eagerly with relieved, surprised delight. "I'm afraid that it's not a marriage that you'll be terribly pleased about. She's married. There'll have to be a divorce first."

To his mother, as to his grandfather, divorce was one of those things that just didn't happen to people that one knew. One read about it as one read about murder and theft and blackmail. But it had its existence in a world one did not enter. "Divorce," she repeated the word in a dull, stupefied, uncomprehending voice. Her husband showed no such alarm, however. In small matters he might be difficult and fussy, but when faced with a really difficult problem he was invariably level-headed and calm-eyed. No one could be more practical at the right moment.

"I see," he said. "And do we know the lady?"

"You've never met her, Father. But you know all about her. Mrs. Herbert Eagar."

"Um. And you're proposing to marry her when her case is through?"

"No, Father."

"How do you mean—no?"

"I've advised her to withdraw her suit."

"That, James, seems curious advice."

"You know, Father, what you said about that case. It's a grubby business. The kind of thing that it takes a lifetime to live down. Could you tolerate the idea of allowing a woman you were in love with to go through it?"

"I see no alternative if you propose to marry her."

"There's the alternative of our going away together and letting him divorce her."

"Of having yourself cited as the corespondent."

"Yes."

At the word corespondent Merrick's mother started in her chair, but his father did not relax his detached judicial attitude. At such moments he was unconcerned with the emotional aspects of a case. The facts alone counted with him. And as he was dealing only with the facts there was no need for him to grow angry and impatient.

There was silence for a moment while Mr. Merrick leaned back in his chair, stroking slowly his long smooth chin bone; deliberating calmly. When he spoke his words had the finality of a judge's summing up.

"This is all," he said, "as you know, of course, a complete surprise. I have not met Mrs. Eagar. I know nothing of her except what I have learnt in the course of this unhappy case. She may be, very probably she is, the most delightful person. Very likely she would make you a very charming and loyal wife. Into that I cannot enter. Anyhow, I should never, I hope, make any attempt to influence you. I shall feel that I have done my duty to you as your father when I have set forth the facts as I see them. For I cannot believe that in the excitement of falling in love you have seen the facts in their true perspective."

He paused. No stranger who had listened could have believed that it was a father who was talking to a son in that shadowed library, so detached and judicial was his tone. But Merrick knew his father well enough to realize that that detachment did not mean indifference, but simply a refusal to rely for his ef-

fects on an emotional appeal. "You can always get what you want," Mr. Merrick had once said, "by appealing to people's emotions. But unless you've touched their intelligence they'll regret their decision afterwards. People's decisions to be binding and to be satisfactory must be based on reason." And it was to the reason always that he appealed. Even when Merrick had been a schoolboy his father had discussed situations rather than exhorted him.

It was in a calm and level voice that he continued.

"I can understand perfectly," he said, "how you must feel about Mrs. Eagar's case as it now stands. It is, as you know, a case that I was not anxious to contest. It is a case in which I should be extremely sorry to see anyone I cared for implicated. I can imagine you saying, 'Anything but that; anything.' At the same time I am not certain that what you are proposing to do is not a jumping out of a frying pan into a fire. You say that you will go away; that she will be divorced quietly; and that by the time you return everyone will have forgotten about it. How can you be sure, however, that that is what will happen? Are you proposing to discuss the matter with Eagar before you go?"

"Scarcely."

"You think that were you to do so he would make difficulties, that he would threaten to refuse to divorce her if you went away, that it would be impossible to make him agree to divorce her quietly if you withdraw the present suit?"

James Merrick hesitated. "I'm not sure. I'd never, I think, considered it. I . . . well, if you put it that way, I suppose that's what I did imagine."

"And you think that by running away together you'll force his hand?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Then I can assure you, my dear son, that you will be doing nothing of the kind. You will be simply playing into his hands. You will have put yourself completely at his mercy."

"I don't see that. What else can he do but divorce her?"

"You mean that's the only chivalrous thing that he can do?"

"Naturally."

Mr. Merrick shook his head slowly.

"When you have been as long in this business," he said, "as I have, you will know that chivalrous instincts are the last thing that one can rely upon. Particularly in a case like this, where you are dealing with a man already made savage and vindictive. Had you, at the very beginning, gone to him and said, 'I'm in love with your wife. I'm going to run away with her. She'll never come back to you. A divorce is the only clean way out,' there might have been a free fight; but when he'd realized that his wife's going was inevitable he would probably have been reasonable. That was, however, at the start. You have now to deal with a very different kind of man. A man who is out for vengeance. The counter charge proves that. In the

mental condition that he is in, your going can only heighten the sense of injustice that he is suffering from. I can see exactly how he will argue it out to himself. 'This is their new game, is it?' he will say. 'First of all they try and get me to let a trumped-up cruelty case'—and that is how he saw it, you must remember—'go through quietly. When that doesn't work, they think they can force my hand by running away together. And no doubt they think themselves very clever. They'll think themselves less clever when they find that I'm just going to stay where I am and do nothing. A husband can't, by English law, force a wife to live with him. But there's no law that can oblige him to divorce her. They can go away together if they like. But never as long as I live shall they be able to live together openly as man and wife.' I think, James, that that is how Herbert Eager will argue it."

It was a point of view that had not previously occurred to Merrick. He had not conceived that any alternative to divorce would be possible to Eagar. Remembering, however, the look of blind and savage anger that he had seen during that last interview on Eagar's face, he realized that it was precisely the attitude he would take, at any rate until that anger had abated. Even so, it was not an insuperable obstacle.

"That's all very well," he said. "I dare say that's what he may think now, and that is what he may do to start with. But it's a cutting off of his nose to spite his face. Which is not a game that one can play indefinitely. It's a situation which means prison for

him as much as for her. Hate dies out. And, anyhow, sooner or later, he'll want to marry again himself."

"Which'll mean," retorted Mr. Merrick, "as collusive a divorce as ever the King's Proctor can have a sniff at. Even if things were able to go straight through at this moment, the possibility of his intervention is a point that would have to be considered very seriously. Eagar would probably have to acknowledge that previous misconduct, and the Judge be asked to exercise his discretion; that, though, is neither here nor there. The point is, how long do you imagine you may have to wait?"

Merrick shrugged his shoulders.

"How can one say? Some woman may catch him on the rebound. He may want to marry again almost at once."

"And equally it may take half a dozen years. Have you considered what kind of a position you'll be in during those years?"

Merrick looked his father steadily in the eyes.

"Are you trying to frighten me?" he asked.

"I am trying to put the facts before you. I am telling you that by running away you are placing yourself unconditionally in the hands of a man from whom you can expect no mercy. As long as he chooses you will have to stay abroad. For a few months, I dare say that will not worry you particularly. But I ask you to picture what life is like in a Riviera town for a person like yourself. You will

spend your whole time among people who, for various reasons, are unable to return to their own countries, who have nothing to do all day, who sit about in cafés, talking scandal and occasioning it. They comprise as worthless a crowd as is to be met with anywhere in Europe."

"One needn't become a part of that life, Father."

"My dear boy, we are gregarious creatures. We must have, if not friends, at least acquaintances. We must be a part of a social life. And they will be very pleasant, often very cultured people you will find there. A few of them are definitely vicious. But for the most part they are just backboneless. They will be charmingly companionable to you. They will welcome you as one of themselves. Look at your position. A man without occupation living on a woman's money."

Had his father's voice been anything but judicial and detached, Merrick might at that point have lost his temper. But it was as hard to be angry with his father in his home as it was easy at his office. Even so, he could not restrain an indignant outburst.

"On a woman's money, Father, what do you mean?"

"I do not see that you would have any other source of income."

Merrick looked incredulously at his father.

"Do you mean to say——" he began, but his father checked him.

"Don't please imagine that I am behaving like the father of melodrama who cuts his son off with a shill-

ing. I am doing nothing of the kind. I am merely trying to explain to you how by running away you will be cutting yourself off. As you know, I have saved very little money. There has never seemed any need for me to. The firm in which I work is eminently sound. I imagined that when I died you would take my place. I should be leaving you, I thought, what was better than money, the opportunity of earning money. If, however, you run away with Mrs. Eagar, you will be robbing yourself of that opportunity. Do you imagine that after such an escapade as you propose you would ever be able to return to Stone Buildings?"

He paused. But Merrick made no reply. He had been prepared for opposition, for anger, for histrionics, but not for this calm marshalling of hostile facts.

"It would be impossible for you to return," his father continued. "The other principals would never permit it. Doctors and solicitors and politicians—those, that is to say, to whom the public entrusts its property and person—have to be as jealous of their reputations as any woman has. To be corespondent in a divorce suit would be bad enough, but for you to have lived without marriage for several years on the Riviera and with a client would permanently discredit you. That, James, you must realize. If you go away with Mrs. Eagar you are by your own act disinheriting yourself. With the best will in the world I am powerless to help you."

Again he paused. And it was very clear that he was waiting for his son to make the suggestion that

though his employment and salary as a solicitor must cease, an allowance might be made to take its place. A certain obstinacy in Merrick's character prevented him, however, from making it. It was left to his mother, who had sat silent while they talked, to speak.

"But, darling," she said, "surely if it's not possible for James to go on working in the firm we could make him an allowance? We could easily economize a little."

"I imagine so."

"Then surely if James's happiness depends on it?"

"If——"

"Father——" Merrick interrupted. But again his father checked him.

"If, I said, but I'm very certain that there's no 'if' about it. You may think now that your happiness depends solely on whether you are or are not with Mrs. Eagar, and for a year or two years you may go on believing it. And I dare say that were it possible for Mrs. Eagar to fit into the general scheme of your life you would be completely happy with her. That I am not disputing. But she is not able to fit into that scheme. And my experience of the world has taught me that it is on the general scheme of life that happiness depends. A man is his work. A man who is not absorbed in his work, who is unproductive, loses his self-respect. That is what would happen to you if you were to go abroad. We take colour from our environment. You would be among people who were not working, who despised work, and you would cease to work. What work, after all, would there be for you

to do? The Riviera is a pleasure ground. And when you came back to England what do you picture yourself as doing? You would be over thirty. And what use has any business for a man of that age without experience and without capital? Think how difficult a man retired from the East finds it. It would be difficult, and after one or two disappointments you would give up trying. One cannot idle with impunity for five years. You would develop into the most melancholy of all objects, the man about town who has no job. I may be wrong. But that is how my experience of the world tells *me* it will go. And I have to stand by *my* experience. Modern life is complex. We are made, each of us, to fit into our particular niche. And we can fit no other. You have been trained for one job. Anywhere else you would be useless. By making you an allowance I should be making it possible for you to become a drone. That I will never do."

He paused, and walking across laid his hand on his son's shoulder.

"My dear boy, you mustn't, I beg of you, think that I am hard with you; that I am unsympathetic. I know what you are feeling. It would be much easier and much pleasanter for me to say, 'Well, it's a pity that it should be this way, but you must make what you wish of your own life. And we'll turn your salary into an allowance.' It would be much easier to do that. But I'ld never forgive myself afterwards if I did, nor I think would you forgive me. I know that these next months will be very difficult to bear. But I'm con-

vinced that it's the lesser of two evils that I'm recommending."

In silence and with bowed head James Merrick listened. It was not possible for him to feel any of the traditional anger and indignation of the son whose will has been crossed by parental prejudice. His father had been very gentle and very considerate, and from his own point of view extremely wise. From the worldly point of view Merrick knew that he was behaving idiotically. He was risking everything: his future, his position, his friends, his interests, his ambitions. One by one he placed them in the scales. A heavy load. But then, on the other side, was Marian: Marian, with her red-brown hair and her laughing eyes, her friendliness and gaiety and sweetness. Marian's kisses. How speedily the scale went down!

Wearily he rose to his feet.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It isn't any good. You're right in a way, of course. But it's not as though there was an alternative. I've got to go, and I've just got to make the best show I can out of it. I'll make a better show than you expect, probably. With a girl like Marian, you see, one just couldn't go to bits; one couldn't let one's self become something that she'ld not respect."

His mother looked at him fondly.

"You must love her a very great deal," she said.

Mr. Merrick sniffed impatiently.

"Love passes. He's loved before."

James Merrick shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe," he said. "But I'm not expecting to again."

★

The moment he entered her room next day Marian Eagar realized that Merrick's interview with his parents had been unsatisfactory.

"What is it?" she asked anxiously. "Are they angry? Have things gone very wrong?"

Merrick smiled reassuringly.

"Not wrong enough to worry us," he said. "Not for more than a very little while, at least. For that little, I'm afraid I shall have to be so ungallant as to ask you to support me. It's like this, you see."

And seated on a cushion at her feet, his head rested against her knees, the palm of a hand held soft against his cheek, he explained to her the essence of his father's objections. "He said that it would ruin my chances as a solicitor. And that he wouldn't do anything to make that easy for me. But the world is pretty full of jobs." He spoke confidently, and indeed the arguments that had seemed weighty enough on the previous evening dwindled into ridiculous proportions here with Marian at his side. It was so childish to imagine that they could ever be apart.

"It'll be a bit rotten for you at first," he said. "We shall have to be fearfully economical; I feel pretty bad about letting you in for it. But it won't be for long. I'll find something to do all right. It's only a question

of waiting. And we can afford to wait, can't we? We're young enough."

She bent forward and kissed his hair. He could not see how thoughtful her eyes were, nor how grave. Nor did he feel any need to wonder why the soft palm should have been pressed closer to his cheek.

"Your father said that we might have five years to wait," she said. "We hadn't expected that. It's a long time."

"It'll pass quickly. We shall be together."

"What'll you do, though? There isn't much to do."

"I might farm."

Marian shook her head dubiously. She knew too well from her childhood's wandering through the Riviera in what farming consisted for the majority of *dépaysés:* a few months of feverish activity, followed by lassitude; the gradual extension of one's acquaintance; an increased number of invitations; the forming of ties and habits that were hampered by farm duties; the eventual handing over of the property to peasants who swindled you. She knew the process. The excuse of work without the fact of work. No, no, she could not let him in for that.

"And I suppose your father's right," she said, "about your finding it difficult to get into anything when you came back."

"Oh, I don't know. If one tried hard enough . . ." he answered vaguely.

Fondly, but critically, she looked down at him. She was six years younger than he was. And felt sixteen

older. She loved him, but she was not blind to him. She saw him for what he was: a man who had been built for one purpose and could serve no other. He was one of those for whom the pleasant pastures of life are foreordained. He had started with the comfortable assurance of security. He had seen life from the start as an easy and simple thing. One had to work, but not overhard, to pass exams. There was plenty of time for play. There was no need to take things seriously. One had to do just well enough. One had a fine time at school, a fine time at Oxford, and afterwards a fine time as a young man in London. Then gradually one grew tired of just amusement. One became conscious of obligations; one married, one had children, one wanted to do the best one could for them. In the late twenties one began to think seriously of things. And since happiness is a ripening sunshine, one's nature had grown rich and mellow. One could bring breeding and decent feeling to that of all professions for which breeding and decent feeling were essential. That was how life had been meant to go for him. That was how life had been going for him.

She knew what he had been on the night when they had first met. She knew what he was becoming now: knew how he was wearying of, and finding unsatisfactory, that life of parties and *affaires* that had seemed so infinitely desirable in the early twenties. He was tired of superficial and temporary relationships. He was prepared to take life seriously. Had they been free to marry, he and she, they would have made, she was

very sure, a decent show of it. He would have been a lover and a husband and a friend. That, though, would have been inside his setting. And she asked herself with a heavy heart what they would be able to make of life outside. She knew so well that drifting European life of the *dépaysé:* knew how it nourished and developed all that was shallow and indolent in human nature, sapping all that was worth while. It was a test to which one would hesitate to put the strongest character. And Jimmy—how immense a risk of ruining his life she would run were she to take it.

With a sigh she released her hand from his, rose to her feet, and walked over to the window.

"We've had a bad deal," she said.

The tone in which she spoke, and the words she used were so out of keeping with his own mood, in so complete a contrast from anything that he had expected of her, that at first he did not appreciate their import.

"What do you mean?" he said. "I don't understand."

Again she sighed.

"A bad deal," she repeated. "We could have had a sweet time together."

"But we're going to have!"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Your father's right, my dear. It's a question of choosing between two evils. And running away to Monte Carlo isn't the frying pan, it's the fire."

He looked at her incredulously.

"You mean—" he began, "you mean——"

"I mean that your father's right. It would be madness, criminal madness for us to go away."

"Then you don't love me."

It was the only explanation that he could see. Marian was not the woman to put material considerations before loving; it was not because she had found she was to be less comfortable than she had expected that she was refusing to come away with him. She did not love him. There could be no other explanation.

As he made it, however, she turned fiercely on him.

"Not love you!" she cried indignantly. "Not love you!" And with cheeks flushed and eyes blazing she cast an impetuous arm about his neck, dragged down his face to hers. "Not love you!" she gasped, and her lips on his were a swooning well of fire. "Can you say after that that I don't love you?"

Then, wearily, she let her arms fall at her sides and turning away leant her hot forehead against the window pane.

"Not love you. Oh, my dear, if you only knew how much," she cried. "So much that I won't let you ruin your life for me."

His arms were about her, and his voice was pleading in her ear. "You wouldn't be," he argued. "We're young. We've plenty of time to build up a new life together. You'ld be ruining my life far more if you were to leave me. I can't do without you now—I can't —I can't." For a while she let him plead, lying inertly there, with some such passive gratitude as travellers know when they huddle before a wayside fire, know-

ing that in a few moments they must go out again into the cold. For a while she listened; then, wearily, she pushed him from her.

"It's no good," she said. "Your father's right. I'ld ruin your life. And I won't let you do that; in just the same way that you wouldn't let me carry on that case. You loved me too much for that. And I love you too much for this. We love each other too much to ruin one another."

Her words were like the passing of a sentence. But still he could not believe that he was to be robbed of happiness. "Then what are you meaning to do?" he asked.

Limply she leant her forehead upon the window pane. Down there in the street below the sun was shining; and the trees in the park were green. And couples were loitering lazily across the grass. And the sky was blue and the air joyous. All this wealth of summer, and in her heart this heavy weight of winter.

"What shall I do?" she said. "I know well enough what I ought to do. If I've got the courage."

★

Alone and lonely in his sombrely lit library Herbert Eagar sat turning listlessly the pages of a detective novel. It was nine o'clock. Two hours before he could hope to feel sleepy enough to go to bed. Two hours. An interminable time. It seemed a century since he had left his office three hours back: they were terrible: these long, slow-passing nights. He had almost come

to dread the moment when he had to leave his desk. As long as he was at his office life was tolerable. There were work and occupation and the welcomed interruption of the telephone. But once away from it—he shuddered as he recalled the long succession of lonely evenings that he had had to endure during the last few weeks. Practically every evening for two months now.

Since Marian had left him he had refused all invitations. In spite of his truculence he was a shy man, sensitive and secretive. He was afraid of the questions that would be put to him, the explanations that he would have to give to account for his wife's absence. And for the same reason he had avoided his club. He had not wanted to give his fellow members an opportunity to remark, "What, Eagar dining here again: is the man never with his wife?" He had preferred to that the lonely return to this empty house, the long melancholy evenings with the novel propped negligently against his knee. Two hours more and as likely as not even then he'ld be unable to sleep.

His eyes fell on the tray beside him with its syphon and glasses and decanted whisky. He half stretched out a hand towards them, then drew it back. Better not. He knew too well what that would mean. One glass and something snapped. His power of resistance went. A craving for drink crept onto him, a craving to sink deeper and deeper into that warm, numb lethargy where he could forget. During the last six weeks that had happened to him too often for him to have any doubt of the consequences of that one drink now.

One glass of whisky and he was done. A new thing altogether with him. He had never been like that before. He had held his liquor. He had known when to begin and when to stop. But now . . .

It was the worry of this lawsuit, he supposed. The long strain of his quarrel with Marian. He had to make all day such an immense effort at self-control that when he allowed that effort to relax in the least degree his troubles appeared so great that he had to find the nearest escape from them. One glass and he was finished. Still, since he knew the symptoms now . . .

For he wasn't going to rot his brain that way, he wasn't going to ruin his life because of a divorce suit and a selfish woman. If he couldn't trust himself to drink moderately, then he would have to cut out alcohol altogether. He'ld tell his man not to put it out another evening. Savagely he pushed away the tray. . . . Was there nothing that woman hadn't spoilt for him?

But he could not read. His thoughts would not concentrate on the flimsy narrative. He let the book drop on the floor. He lay back in his chair, his mind abrood upon his troubles, letting the minutes pass. Behind him he heard the sound of a door opening. Batson coming to ask if he should lock up.

"Yes, that's all, Batson, thank you," he said, "and another evening you needn't bother to put the whisky out. I'm going to knock it off. Good-night."

But there was no answering good-night. And the tread on the thick pile carpet was lighter than Batson's

had ever been. Inquisitively he turned round in his chair: to start a second later impulsively to his feet, one hand raised towards his throat, the other clenched tightly at his side. He stared and gasped, tried to speak, but could only stammer on a note of incredulous surprise the one word "You!"

For a full minute they must have stood, staring at one another; then he recovered his control. "How did you get in?" he asked. "I heard no bell ring."

Marian smiled. "Have you forgotten," she said, "that terribly long discussion we had two years ago about my latchkey?"

It was an answer that might easily have been made to sound bitter and ironic, but as Marian made it it had a strange and disarming quality of sweetness. But Eagar was not in a conciliatory mood.

"Well, and what have you come here for?" he asked.

"To talk, Herbert, and quietly. Let's sit down."

He waited for her to begin. She seemed neither hurried nor embarrassed; and with a composure that surprised him she took a cigarette from a wooden box upon the mantelpiece, struck a match, and lighted it.

"I want to talk quietly," she said, "and calmly, before it's too late. We seem to be heading, my dear, for a pretty heavy smash."

He laughed at that: a bullying, scornful laugh.

"I see," he said. "So this is the new move, is it? You've tried everything in turn. First you try and bluff me into letting an absurd cruelty charge go through. Then you ask me to agree to a collusion

divorce. You send that dandified young lawyer of yours round to see if he can't persuade me to be chivalrous. Then, when none of that takes, you come round yourself to see if you can't work upon my pity. If that is what you are here for, my girl, I can tell you here and now that you are wasting your time and might as well go home."

He spoke brutally and aggressively, but no flush came into Marian's cheeks. She smiled a little wanly and shook her head.

"It isn't that," she said.

She seemed in no hurry, however, to tell him what it was. She was looking round with an oddly pensive expression on her face. It had never been a favourite room of hers, this library; it had been too sombre for her taste. She had never spent much time in it, but never had she seen it looking so grim and lugubrious as it did to-night, with no flowers on the mantelpiece, no flowers on the writing desk, no flowers before the deserted grate. It was as though it had wilted without her care. And suddenly she felt sorry for her husband. He seemed a pathetic figure to her, alone in this gloomy room. And her heart softened with what was perhaps the first tender emotion she had ever felt for him. Years back in the days of courtship he had thrilled her, but it had been selfishly that she had been stirred, selfishly that she had responded. His virility, his power to protect and lead and assure had represented qualities of life she lacked. She had wanted something that he had. It had been a bargaining; that, and no more than

that. And there is no tenderness in bargaining. She was nearer to loving him at this moment than she had ever been.

"No, no," she said. "It's something quite other than that that I've come to say to you. I want to ask you if you remember that letter you wrote me, it was rather a sweet letter, some six weeks back, at the very beginning of our trouble."

The question was so completely a surprise to Eagar that at first he could not answer.

"That letter," he said at length. "Why, yes, naturally, of course I do."

"You remember what you said in it?"

"More or less."

"And would you still agree with what you said in it?"

He looked at her searchingly, trying to fathom her thought, but he could read nothing behind the mask of those fresh, unlined features. Still agree with what he had said in it? But how could one talk of agreeing or not agreeing with the contents of a letter the occasion and need of which had passed? He temporized.

"I don't understand," he said, "what you mean exactly."

"I'll remind you, then. You spoke of the failure we'd made of our life together, how different a thing our marriage was from the thing we'd dreamed for it. You spoke of our separate personalities. Of the difference in age and upbringing. You were a Northerner, you said, and I a Londoner; though in truth I'm far more

a cosmopolitan than a Londoner, but let that pass. You said that it was as impossible for you to be happy leading my life in London as it would be for me to be happy leading your life in Liverpool. You remember that?"

"I remember."

"And you said that in Sydney it might be better: in a new country where we should be beginning an entirely new life among new people, among fresh surroundings. Do you remember that?"

"I remember."

"And when you wrote that letter you really believed that, in spite of all our quarrels, in spite of our different ages and different upbringings, we should be happy in Australia? You really believed that when you wrote that letter?"

"I did."

She paused, drawing a long breath slowly. She had come to the climax now, to the assault that she would need all her courage to sustain.

"Very well," she said quietly. "What I've come to ask you, my dear, is this. Do you still believe that?"

He started. But even now he could not follow her thoughts. Believe or not believe, what did it matter either way? The issue was so long past, and as before, "I don't understand," he said, "what you mean exactly."

She smiled with one of those smiles that, in spite of her youth, seemed to come from an age-old store of wisdom. "I'm afraid, my dear, that you're a little

dense to-night; or perhaps you think I'm being subtle and obscure. Which I'm not. There couldn't be a more straightforward question than the one I'm putting to you. You believed once that we could be happy in Australia. I'm asking you if you believe that now. For the position isn't the same now as it was when you wrote that letter. A good deal's happened in the last two months. And it's no use our ignoring those things, no use pretending that they haven't happened. They have, and they are a part of our lives forever. So what I'm asking you is this: do you, after all that's happened, still believe that it would be possible for us to be happy out there?"

He had caught the line, now, of her reasoning; but it was so unexpected that he could not be certain yet. And he was not going to commit himself until he was; he was not going to make himself ridiculous in her eyes. Besides, the wounds to his masculine vanity had need of ointment.

"Go on," he said.

Within her shoes Marian's toes curled down towards the soles. He was not giving her much encouragement. He was not making it too easy for her and the temptation to self-assertion was very strong. "Oh, very well," she had it on her tongue to say, "if that's all you think of the thing I'm bringing you I'll take it back with me. It hasn't been easy for me to come here to you, and if you're not going to meet me halfway I'll just go back again." It was all that he had deserved. She was resolved, however, to see the business through.

With a wry smile, but with a voice that was soft still, and uncontentious, she continued:

"But I can't go on, Herbert. There isn't any more for me to say. That was what I came to ask you: to ask you whether you still believe that we could be happy if I were to come to you and say 'The past is over. Let us forget everything about it except the lessons that there were for us to learn from it.' Suppose I were to come to you and say that, if you were content to begin again, I was; that I would start right again at the beginning; that I would do my best to make you happy, to be a devoted and loyal wife to you. If I were to say that, would you still believe that we could be happy?"

At first he could scarcely believe that what he heard was true. Could it be possible, this complete capitulation? His heart was thudding with pride, happiness, and excitement.

"And is—is it that," he stammered, "that y-you are saying to me?"

She nodded her head. "And I'm waiting," she told him, "for your answer."

Not that there was any need to wait for it. His answer was written clearly in the brightness of his eyes, his quick breathing, his trembling hands. How could she have ever imagined that there could be any question about that answer? He loved her; he had always loved her. There had been never a woman in his life that had really mattered before she came into it, and

there would never be another. She must have known all along that she had only to lift a finger to get him back. There was no need for him to speak his answer.

"Marian, my dear," he stammered, and he had risen to his feet, he was stumbling across the room towards her; to take her into his arms, to call her his own again.

But she, too, had risen to her feet, and a small white hand had been lifted before his face.

"No, no," she said, "not now. I'm tired, Herbert. If you knew how tired."

And with a sudden twist of her shoulder she turned away to stand at the window in the gap of half-drawn curtains to gaze with eyes that were looking upon nothing onto the green gloom of a London garden.

★

They met, Marian and Merrick, for lunch next morning at Gramati's. There was a sad and pensive look in her eyes that to Merrick seemed like the passing of a sentence. He could scarcely wait till his hat and stick and gloves had been taken from him.

"Darling," he said, "what's happened? You were so mysterious last night. You just said that you knew what you ought to do. You wouldn't tell me what it was."

"I couldn't. I wasn't certain if I'ld have the courage to go through with it."

"And now?"

"I've found I have."

In her eyes there was again that puzzling look of age-old wisdom. "I wasn't certain," she said, "whether I should be strong enough. I found I was. Last night I went and saw my husband."

To see her husband. His cheeks flushed and his blood leapt eagerly. So it was for that that she had been doubtful of her courage. To see her husband, to persuade him, when everyone else had failed, to be reasonable.

"And he agreed," he cried eagerly, "he saw reason?"

"Oh, yes," she said, "he saw reason."

"And he's going to drop the case?"

"There'll be no case now."

"He's going to let the divorce go through?"

Slowly Marian shook her head. "There's not going to be any more trouble about divorce. It wasn't about that that I went to see my husband."

"Not about that!"

At first he could not grasp the significance of her admission. She was looking at him with such sad, such tender eyes. . . .

"Your husband, then—then——" He hesitated. Oh, but it could not, surely it could not be that. She could not have gone back to Eagar, to the man who had struck her, the man who had been unfaithful to her, the man who had been prepared to dirty her reputation in the law courts. She could not have gone back to that; straight from his kisses back to that.

"You don't mean, you can't mean——" he said. And yet, if she didn't mean that, what could she mean?

What else was there for her to mean, if she had not gone to persuade him to be reasonable about the case? "You can't have gone back to him!" he cried.

Beneath the low brim of her hat her fingers made a swift gesture of denial.

"No, no," she said. "Back to that house, with all its memories, to that old life. No, no, that I could never do. But Australia, that'll be different. When his ship sails for Sydney, I'll be with him."

Merrick stared at her incredulously.

"Australia!" he repeated.

Marian shrugged her shoulders.

"What else is there for me to do? Your father's right. I'ld ruin your life if I ran away with you. I'm not going to do that. I've got to take the lesser of two evils. It'll be better in the long run for both of us. It'll be difficult, I know that. There'll be a lot about it that I'll hate. But we'll be both new to it. We shall start on level terms. There'll be a chance of our building something up together."

Building something up together. But it was she and he, not she and Eagar, who should be building up a life together. It was maddening; it was ridiculous, this talk about Australia. Even if it were not going to be possible for them to run away together, why must she go back to Eagar, why set these miles of ocean between her and him?

"But look here," he said, "this is preposterous, even if my father's right, and I don't think he is, there's no

need surely to jump madly to the other extreme. Why Australia? Even if you can't come with me, you can keep your freedom."

She shook her head, and again there came into her eyes that look of wisdom.

"And where, then, are you suggesting that I should go?"

"Anywhere but there."

"And if I were anywhere but there, if I were anywhere but with my husband, do you imagine that loving you as I love you I should be able to keep away from London, that I should be able to keep away from you?"

Her cheeks had flushed and her eyes were glowing, and his breath caught at the picture that her words evoked. But she was ruthlessly practical, she saw the cycle of effect and cause too well to be blind to what that picture meant.

"I shouldn't be able to keep away from you," she went on. "And do you imagine that there would be any happiness for us that way, loving as we do? An intrigue may be all very well when one's half hearted. It may be, I don't know. I've no experience of it. But for us who do love it just wouldn't do. Sooner or later we'ld find we couldn't stand it. We'ld cut and run. We'ld fling our lots together. And we'ld be in the mess that I'ld give my life to save you from. No, no, my sweet, I've got to go."

"Which only means that it's your life not mine that's going to be ruined. To go out there with him!"

Marian looked curiously at him. "He's not a bad sort, you know, not really, not at heart."

"But, darlingest, you'll hate it."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I'll make a decent show of it," she said.

Her voice and her eyes were very soft. And his eyes flooded with tears as they looked at her. That this should be the end. It was so incredible, so monstrous that nothing should come out of their loving.

"It's such a waste," he cried, and he began to plead hotly, eagerly. But she would not listen. Her hand was lifted to bid him cease.

"My dear," she said, "it's no use talking. It's an impossible situation."

VI

OF WHAT happened during the weeks that followed Marian's decision to accompany her husband to Australia, I know practically nothing; it was, as she had said, an impossible situation. The typical impossible situation of the play and novel, and such a situation as James Merrick's imagination had maybe often pictured as a setting. The love dreams of a young man are coloured by what he reads. Most love stories, since it is rare for those who feel themselves to be destined for one another to be free at the hour of their first meeting, have to tell of a happiness that has been foregone or stolen or won to at the price of some other person's. And Merrick had read *Sapho* and *Spring Floods, La Dame aux Camélias* and *Mademoiselle de Maupin,* and reading them had thought enviously, "How marvellous it must be to be able to feel like that! If only such an experience would come my way!" It is inevitable that he should have felt like that. For though a young man may be in love with love he is decidedly out of love with the normal conditions and consequences of loving. He sees marriage as the closing of a door; the curtain on adventure and romance. He is

in love with freedom. And yet it takes but a little while, unless he is very shallow natured, to realize how grievous a thing is the burden of light loving. To talk of free love is to contradict one's self. He neither is loved nor loves who has no fetters laid on him. Where nothing is at stake there can be no true rapture won to; and when two people can say, "Well, this has been very jolly, and now we'll tell each other good-bye, and there'll be no regrets, no pain on either side," they are confessing that they have never cared; that that which they have shared together bears the same relationship to love that does to friendship the exchange of drinks in a Pullman car with a man whom you will never see or think about again. When the itch of curiosity has been set at rest there can be no more than the solacing of vanity and nervous restlessness in such encounters. Which is not romance.

And so it is towards the impossible situation, to the passion that sears, but which will leave him free that the imagination of a young man turns. It is not in this way precisely that he will present the matter to himself, his longing will not be honestly self-confessed, but it amounts in point of fact to this: that he wants to be able to feel and to protest an undying passion in circumstances where he may not be taken at his word.

Sapho was written as an object lesson to young men, but in actual fact there is no book more calculated to inflame their imagination. It is the story of a man, after all, who gets off apparently scot-free, who knows the ardours and tempests of that woman who was "*toute*

la lyre" and yet is spared the sorry gleaning, who is left free at the last to marry, if he so choose, some quiet country girl, or if he prefer, to distract himself with light-hearted loving. The young men must be few who have read *Sapho* without envy of Jean Caussin's fate. And James Merrick must have often pictured himself in a situation where he would say and would say sincerely, "This is the end, if you leave me, this will be the end. I've not loved before and I'll not love again. There's nothing in the world I wouldn't give to make you happy." And saying that, to be met with a sad and wistful smile, with a slowly shaken head and a voice that trembles, "My dear, there's nothing in the world I wouldn't give you; I'm yours completely. But, dearest one, it's just not possible." To love like that, under the shadow of separation, pleading and vowing and imploring, with kisses made keener by despair, to feel and believe that your heart is breaking, and yet for that love not to be the curtain to romance; for that love to leave you free, when it is all over, to love again. It was with some such dream of loving that, in the days before he met Marian Eagar, James Merrick must assuredly have soothed his dejected hours. And life had chosen to take him at his word.

As, I think, life always does take us at our word. We are like children struggling with a problem in algebra, and life is the master who works the sum out for us on the blackboard. We think this of life and that. We build up a dream future for ourselves. "If only it could be like this!" we say. And life stands behind our

shoulder and watches us. And smiles, ironically but not maliciously. He is detached and indifferent as he walks over to the blackboard. "So that was what you wanted," he says. "Well, here it is. This is the thing you asked for. Are you satisfied? Does it content you?" And we gasp. For it is not by any means the thing we meant. And we have the letter but not the spirit of our desire.

To the young man who read *La Dame aux Camélias* enviously the impossible situation comes. He loves and he is loved where he is free to love and is not free to marry. And there are the tears and protestations, the raptures and the anguish; the bitterly sweet days, rendered bitterer and sweeter by the foreknowledge of separation. He has the thing he asked for; the door of the future is not closed; there is a date upon a calendar after which he can return to his old life and interests and opportunities. And with a sick heart he realizes how completely other a thing this is from that which he had dreamed; how useless a thing is that freedom he had so highly rated.

For he had seen the impossible situation in terms not of love but of those casual courtships that had distracted his idle hours. He had pictured it, not as something completely other, but as an intensifying of those hours. He had not realized that previously he had only valued freedom because he had faith in the future's possibilities. But that now, believing no longer that the future can hold anything better than that which he holds and is about to lose, freedom is without value. He

is in a country where it is a coin that has no currency. There is nothing that it will purchase.

And the days will pass. And the anguish and the rapture will grow more deep, the hour which his imagination had fondly pictured will draw close: the hour of parting when, from books and from an experience that had known love-making but not known love, he had fancied that the misery of a farewell kiss would be consoled by the knowledge of an abundant future; the hour when he will have to learn that nothing can be had both ways; that the future and the freedom of the future are a negligible medicine.

The hour will come. There will be the piling of luggage on a car; the waving of a hand from the steps of a hotel; with a brooding wail—and than the slow whistle of an express there is no sound in the world more wistful—a long lean train sets out across a continent. There is a liner swinging outwards from a quay; the faces of those watching from the wharf grow indistinct; a white figure turns away trailing a parasol. The hour has come. And it is just no use trying to be literary about it.

The impossible situation: life had taken James Merrick very adequately at his word.

★

But as I said, of what happened during those weeks, I know practically nothing. Merrick has never spoken of them. I do not even know if they were lovers; whether it was to the memory of a realized or unreal-

ized love that the remainder of his life was held in trust.

To an unrealized, the romanticists will say. And they will quote Dante and Wagner and Louys' Aphrodite and all that Turgenev literature of renunciation and regret. The ideal, they will say, is destroyed by actuality; the perfect love, as all else that is perfect, exists only within the imagination. And for an irresolute and dreaming nature it may well be that it is the love that has had least contact with reality that can resist most vigorously the despoiling years. For such a one it may be.

James Merrick was not, however, that type of person. He lived in a world of facts. His imagination was inactive. That long fidelity which is only possible for the man who has had by one woman all other women spoiled for him would need, I fancy, in Merrick's case, more sturdy nourishment than a dream. A fact that Marian, who loved him enough to understand him, must have realized. And though it may well be that Merrick himself hesitated, remembering the disenchantment that had been the invariable consequence of conquest, Marian must have known that unless she revealed to him all that a true union could mean, some other woman would. And that prospect, the prospect of being no more than a forerunner, was something that a woman so purposeful as Marian could never face. That, anyhow, is the way I picture it.

With the mind's eye I see a summer evening, exquisite and tranquil, with the air cool and mild and the last lights faded in the sky; and Merrick returned

from cricket, stretched lazy and indolent in a chair, with the shimmer of one shaded lamp turned on, too tired to read, flung back there, dreaming; half sad, half happy; and there is a faint knock upon the door, and a white figure is standing on the stairs; a smile fluttering on her lips, a smile that comes seemingly from vast distances of wisdom. And it is silently that she steps across the room. And Merrick is seated on the floor against her knees, and he does not know whether it is excitement or fear that makes his heart beat madly. And her finger tips pass slowly through his hair and: "You must not be frightened," her voice says softly; "this isn't going to be like anything that's been before."

And next morning as he sits at his office desk looking out over the green trees of Lincoln's Inn he pictures with a sense of nostalgia, too acute almost to be endured, all that marriage to Marian would have meant, all the beauty and the sweetness that would have been transfused across his life. Life would be a different thing and he a different person were he to be Marian's husband. The sentimentalists were not always wrong. Love did alter things. How could any man, he wonders, be spiteful and revengeful at an office desk who had known twelve hours back the rapture and purity of such a love as Marian's? You could not on the morrow of such a night be anything but gentle and chivalrous and courteous to other men. You could not within twelve hours of a thing like that be bullying and tyrannical, be sharp and shrewd, calculating and worldly wise. You could not be cynical and

bitter and contemptuous. You could not be sour towards what was fresh and buoyant and unpractical. You could not be the man of affairs seeing life in terms of money and advancement. "If I had Marian," he thinks, "I'ld be incapable of doing anything petty in my life."

And leaning forwards, his head upon his hands, he pictures the long succession of days and weeks, of months and years that lie ahead of him, the long uncertain years with the memory of Marian growing weaker hour by hour. "If I forget her," he thinks, "I'm done for. I must cling tight to the memory of her. It'll be all I've got. It'll be all I'll have. I'll be nothing without that, nothing."

Those few, those precious hours.

★

"In a dream untroubled of hope" it must have been that those last weeks passed. A lovely and a roseate dream. For happiness can be achieved even under the shadow of separation. These things are relative. You cannot mark out that which is timeless in terms of time. And Marian and Merrick were in harmony with an eternal process. Their happiness would be so complete they would not be able to believe that there should be set a limit to it.

"It seems," he would say, "impossible that this can ever end. We belong so completely to one another. I can't imagine that we shall be separated."

"We shan't be," she would answer, "in the things that matter."

Most of their spare time they would spend together. Eagar would be unlikely to place any check upon her movements. He would have no cause to be suspicious. He had won his fight. Ill feeling dies with the firing of the last shot. The hour for reconciliation had come. It would be time enough when the ship sailed and the new life had started for the business of mutual self-adjustment to be set in hand. He had gained his point. He could afford to wait. So that Merrick and Marian were saved the wearing and ignoble subterfuge of an intrigue. They were free to spend as they chose their brief time of freedom, to wander picnicking among the hackneyed and immortal haunts of lovers, Epping and Hampstead, Friday Street and Marlow, lying out on the green grass under the kindly skies: and on the wet days to go to plays and dances, to hear music together, and read books.

I have spent many hours in Merrick's library; lying along cushions on the floor, taking book after book down from the shelves, listening languidly to the music that he played from the far corner on the pianola. But I doubt if it was out of those books they read, or to that music that they listened. To most love affairs there is the association of some piece of music or another, but they are the few who are lured, as Swann was, to the perfection of some Vinteuil's sonata. Most lovers are frightened of the unchallenged masterpiece; there is a cold and inhospitable quality about

those eternal rhythms that were played a hundred years before they were born and will be listened to centuries after they are dead. They turn rather to those light favourites of an hour, those trifles of the stage and music hall that please for a season and are forgotten; in whose brief and ample flowering they find a kinship of mortality with their own short-lived summer.

I do not know what were the tunes to which they danced, the songs they played to one another on the gramophone: I do not know what were their equivalents for those songs of ours for whose trace the next generation will search in vain. "Side by Side." "Me and My Shadow."

> Wherever you go
> Whatever you do
> I want you to know
> I love you.

Those foolish and worthless trifles that touch the heart more nearly than the stately sonatas can. What may have been the equivalent for them I do not know. But I like to think of them seated in the stalls of the St. James's Theatre, hand close locked in hand, listening to the sonorous blank verse of Paolo:

> . . . O face immured beside a faëry sea
> That leaned down at dead midnight to be kissed . . .

Those sounding lines that thrilled and have ceased to thrill. Those lines that Merrick would not have the heart now to reread.

"A dream untroubled of hope." . . .

So untroubled that they could discuss calmly the future they were not to share.

"I wonder," he said, "if it would be always like this if we were free; if we'd always be as happy as we are now."

"Oh, I expect we'ld find something to quarrel over," she would laugh.

"Do you think so? Really think so?" And his forehead would pucker solemnly.

But Marian could never allow a discussion to remain serious for long.

"Oh, my dear, there'ld be hundreds of things. There'ld be children, I expect, and you'ld probably be teaching your daughter to play cricket and I'ld object."

Though Merrick smiled, however, he remained thoughtful. "I wonder," he said. "I wonder. If we were free, if we could marry now, would we really get like everybody else and quarrel and become indifferent and start affairs? Were all the married people that we see making such a compromise of things just like we are, once?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps, my dear," she said, "we've been spared a lot."

But he shook his head. That he could not believe; that he refused steadfastly to believe. They would not have become like everyone else. They would not have quarrelled and nagged and been unfaithful. They would not have grown bored with one another. They would not have exhausted one another. The harmony be-

tween them would have grown deeper and stronger as time passed. Whatever happened he would go on believing that. The sentimentalists are not always wrong. There was such a thing in life as a love that deepened.

There were times, though, when it was less easy to be brave; times when "the yoke of inauspicious stars" grew hard to carry. Particularly as the hour of parting grew more close; as the time came for the marking of a last day upon the calendar.

"If only," she wailed, "it hadn't got to be like that. That last night, watching the hands of the clock go round. If only the last night could have come without our knowing it was the last night, if something could happen to make our last night one that we never thought would be our last! I don't know how I shall be able to face it, that saying to myself, 'This is the last time, the very last.' "

And there were no words that he could find to comfort her.

"Watching the hands of the clock go round," she sobbed, "saying 'Another five hours, another hour, another half-hour!' Hearing it tick away our happiness. Oh, my dear one, how'll I be able to stand it? I'll die surely!"

The last night: the night to which they knew there could be no successor.

Perhaps, though, fate was charitable to them at the end. Perhaps they were spared that watching of the clock, that torturing knowledge "This is for the last

time, the very last"; perhaps as they lay quietly, the fury of longing eased, a pause came in their talk; a pause that lengthened; so that, unknown, sleep came to them unbidden, so that they lost count of the unhurrying minutes and the unhurrying night; so that when dawn fell across their faces there was left only the merciful haste of cabs and telephones.

Perhaps. . . .

But, as I said, all this is purely guesswork. It may not have been at all like that.

★

Of all that passed during those last weeks this alone I know, that one day they were talking of their position. "Do you realize that if this were America," he said, "if it were any other country but Italy and this, none of this need have happened? If the divorce laws had not been mediæval, there'ld have been no need to bring up that charge of cruelty. You could have divorced your husband on the one count. He'ld have had no defence. It would have gone through quite simply. In Germany or America or France we'ld be man and wife by now."

And she had nodded her head.

"The law's about a hundred years out of date," she said. "By the time it's got level with us we'll have been in our graves a hundred years."

He had set his jaw resolutely.

"The law. It's almost worth going into Parliament to have a shot at altering it. Though I suppose as a

lawyer one could do a good deal in a subterranean way outside. One could put the layman on the right track."

She had smiled.

"It would be rather amusing," she said, "to get a law altered after it had ceased to matter to you. Still," she had added thoughtfully, "it would be a thing worth doing."

That, he told me, that, and one other thing. The last words practically that passed between them.

"You mustn't write to me," she said.

"Not write!" he echoed.

She shook her head.

"It would be more than I could stand. Without your letters it'll be bad enough, but with them—no, no, it would be too much. Watching the papers every day for news of the next mail. I couldn't settle down that way."

Even so, he was unconvinced.

"Not write!" he said, "but how shall I know that you've not forgotten me?"

She smiled sadly.

"You need have no fear of that," she said. "But all the same I'll find a way of telling you."

And her eyes were soft and clouded and, "Is this," he asked himself, "what people mean when they talk about a broken heart?"

★

It was a question that he asked himself many times during the next few weeks; during the weeks when

everything he did and everyone he saw appeared to be coming to him through a mist. The routine of his life continued. At Stone Buildings every morning he dictated letters, conveyed property, drafted wills, interviewed clients. And every day at two o'clock precisely he left his desk to walk up Chancery Lane to his high stool at the First Avenue Hotel: to his pint of stout and his two dozen natives. And in the evenings he would climb the rickety stairs in Air Street to the fourth-floor flat that was terribly full of ghosts now for him, and he would bathe and shave and change into his evening clothes, and there would be a dinner or a dance or at his club a quiet hand of bridge. And he would talk of politics and cricket and theatres and personalities. And all the time he would feel that the people he was talking to were not really there; which meant, of course, as he told himself, that he was not there himself. "Which I'm not," he added. "I'm eight thousand miles away on a ship two thirds of its way to Sydney." And when he woke in the morning it was with the desolating sense that his eyes were opening on a day that could hold nothing that could move him in any way, that could please or distress or sadden or annoy him. He was inoculated against emotion. "I might just as well be dead," he thought, "which I am, really. I'm a ghost in a world of ghosts. I died when that cab drove away. There is nothing I want to do, no one I want to see, nowhere I want to go. And it will be like this always: right to the end."

★

Which, of course, it wasn't. One cannot live in a vacuum forever.

But it would need a writer such as Proust and a book such as *À la recherche du temps perdu* to describe the stages by which one returns to life after a disaster, whatsoever it may be: the death of a parent, the loss of love, bankruptcy, the failure of ambition, any one of those calamities that make man say, "This is the end. I shall go on living. But the tale is told." It would need a writer such as Proust to convey the significance of those first tentacles of interest flung out tentatively towards a game, perhaps, or a party, or a new-met personality; that first relaxing to environment, that losing of one's self in a conversation; that momentary forgetting of one's trouble, of ceasing to be a phantom among phantoms. It is a moment that passes quickly, from whose temporary harbourage one is recalled by the voice that whispers, "Yes, this is all very well, but you're only drugging yourself. You're not really happy. You're not really here. All this means nothing to you."

The voice whispers and it is heard. But the moment of oblivion returns; to stay more lengthily, to return more frequently. You find yourself enjoying things; you find yourself looking forward to things; you wake in the morning to the prospect of enjoyment. The voice still whispers, but less often, less loudly, less insistently. Your trouble is moving out of the foreground into the background of your life.

It is reluctantly, however, that you see it go; it is

jealously that you resist the inroads of returning life. It is as though a gift that you had made were being returned to you; so that you wonder if it had any value. "Is that all it can have meant, all that I can have felt?" you ask. "Can it really be that I'm getting over it?" And life appears to you as a lonely and trivial and shallow thing. Often, with a sick heart, James Merrick must have asked himself during those weeks of silence whether their loving had after all been only a little thing. He has had no word from her. The days pass; the pain decreases. Is he forgetting? Has she forgotten?

And then one morning he finds lying on his table a newspaper, its wrapper addressed to him in a familiar writing. And he looks, and his breath stops, and it is sheer agony and sheer delight. It is her message to him; her signal that she has not forgotten. His fingers tremble as they tear the paper.

At first he does not understand. It is the weekly edition of the *Australasian*. And he cannot understand why she should have sent it. There is no letter, no enclosure. Dubiously he spreads it out and searches: but there is no clue. Then suddenly, on a page halfway through, he pauses, and the blood rushes to his cheeks, and he understands why she has sent it to him. An English cricket side is touring in Australia. In this issue is the account of the first test match. But his eyes are too full of tears for him to read. She could have found no surer way of telling him that she remembered. This knowledge of hers that he would be

curious to read the account of the cricket from an Australian angle proved more clearly than would the costliest of gifts how completely she had loved him; had loved him enough to understand him. And he rose from his desk and walked over to the window and looked out over the withered and leafless branches, and he did not know whether it was with misery or happiness that his heart was full. This alone he knew, that for the first and last time in his life he had known love. Whatever happened he would never feel like that again. He and Marian were a part of one another. Love was a belonging. He could never belong to another person.

And standing there the memory came back to him of that other talk with Marian, their talk of the divorce laws. "You know, it would be amusing to get the law altered," she had said, "when it had ceased to matter to you how it went." Remembered how she had added, "There would be things less worth doing." And as he remembered a resolve came to him. A resolve to oppose sturdily with all he possessed of energy and authority the mediæval inhumanity of the English laws. His life had been spoilt by them; there was no remedy for that. It might be, though, that Marian would have children, that her children might one day find themselves in such a dilemma as their mother had. His life would not, he felt, have been wasted could Marian's children be alive in a world where the injustice that had been done their mother was no longer possible.

"One must have a reason for living," he thought; "I'll make that mine."

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And that is the quarter of a century ago. And twenty-five years is a long time in which to remain faithful to a memory.

That there have been women in his life seems to me inevitable. A protracted chastity must have left some trace in him. There would be something "gaga" somewhere. And that there is not. He gives the impression of being indifferent to women, and that attitude is only possible to the man whose life is touched physically but not emotionally by them. And emotionally he never has been touched again. At least he has not married.

It may be that he prefers bachelordom. But I like to think that this long celibacy is a loyalty held in trust to Marian's memory. It is not that he can have any hopes of her coming back to him. Perhaps at this late day he would not even wish her to. They would be different people now. But though there has been set between them the physical barrier of months and years, there has been no spiritual barrier. No intimacy has come to displace that intimacy. There has come never a time when he could not have said truthfully to her, "You stand first as you have stood first, as you always will stand first." It is to that he holds: to the resolve that there shall never come a time when he will be unable to say to her, "There is no one but you.

There never has been, there never will be anyone but you." In his fashion he has been faithful.

It would be idle and sentimental, though, to pretend that Merrick has led anything but a happy life. He has had his friends, his work, his games. Being unextravagant, he has never had to bother about money. As an athlete he has not been worried by ill health. A Londoner in touch with many interests in the most varied of all cities, his diary has never been anything but a mosaic of engagements. A number of decent people have been fond of him. He has known and met on terms of equality many of the most distinguished of his contemporaries. He has worked loyally and unselfishly for his clients. And he has played a conspicuous part in the struggle for divorce reform.

Of the injustices that destroyed his happiness many are now removed. There would be no complications to-day in the case of Eagar *versus* Eagar. A man may be divorced for unfaithfulness alone. The newspaper reports of divorce proceedings have been restricted so that men and women may seek private redress for private grievances without making Aunt Sallies of themselves in public. And whether or not it is to be in Merrick's lifetime that the last ramparts of bigotry go down, and divorce by mutual consent becomes as much a matter of course as a marriage by mutual consent, it must be admitted that what was ultimately in the development of civilized thought inevitable has been brought at least a decade closer by Merrick's efforts.

James Merrick has lived a full and varied life, and most people would say that he had "got over" Marian comfortably enough. But that would be the worldly or, as you choose to look at it, the romantic view of the situation. For the romantic and the worldly view are in this case identical. One falls in love, the course of love is frustrated. And either one denies life by shooting one's self or by going into a monastery, or else one decides that even without love life is well worth living, and one "gets over" it. That is both the worldly and the romantic view.

But one cannot talk about "getting over" a love affair. One comes through it, and that is a different matter. One comes through and there is so much that is left behind. It is like a regiment going into action. There is a line of trenches to be stormed; there is the barrage of howitzers and machine guns; there are the wire and the bayonets, the bombs and bullets. It is but a tattered remnant that answers to the muster roll. And though there will be an issuing of new equipment, a marshalling of recruits, a filling up of gaps, though the regiment will march past with its ranks closed, under the same banner, under the same name, it will be no longer the same regiment that stormed those trenches. It has come through, something of it, and that is all.

Of how much of himself James Merrick left behind I can only guess from my knowledge of that of him which has come through. But there are times when I suspect that it was all that was poetical, all that was

romantic and unworldly and uncalculating, that he gave over and for all time into Marian's keeping. Certainly it is all that is practical and material and calculating that has survived in this man in his later middle years, who fusses over the arrangement of a vase, over the correct temperature of a room, over the observances of a social code, over the amenities of travel. A man in whom poetry has died. That is what James Merrick has been for twenty years; that is what he will be for the twenty years that lie ahead of him. Those comfortable, agreeable, uneventful years. There are times when I see them as the pouring of so much water through a sieve.

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I shall not forget the day on which Merrick told his story to me. It was a Saturday in early January. There was an international at Twickenham on account of which the football match that I was to have played in had been cancelled. And we sat for a long while over our port in the small drawing-room annex at the Granville, I listening, he talking. It was after five when I left the club; after five, and it was cold, and there was a light rain falling, and the lamps shone mistily down Piccadilly. There was a test match in Australia. Hobbs had batted all day and made a hundred, and the placards of the evening papers bore in scarlet lettering, "THANK YOU, HOBBS." Australia! with a new day just beginning. And the sun shining high above the Heads and the tramcars clat-

tering down Pitt Street. A Sunday morning, and all the young people hurrying out with their sandwiches and bathing clothes; all that stir of vigorous young life. Manly, Coggee, Bondi, the golden beaches; and the family parties stretched out under the sun upon the sand. And the long rows of bathers in the surf, struggling forward like long lines of infantry in attack into the surge and splash of the rolling Pacific breakers. Australia. The Alien Corn. With somewhere among those thousands Marian.

A Marian, though, over whose red-brown head twenty-five years had passed. A Marian whom, as likely as not, Merrick himself would not recognize were he to meet her now. The gold in the hair, the silver in the voice. But it was not only those that went. She would have become, as Merrick had become another Merrick, another Marian. A grandmother, very likely, with responsibilities and duties and cares of home. Who could say what would be remaining of the Marian who tapped once on the door of a fourth-floor flat in Air Street? The handwriting upon a wrapper, but what else?

What else remained, indeed, anywhere of their love? The world that they had loved in, the old world of ease and leisure, of privilege and safety, that had gone. And the London that they had loved in, gone or going; the scaffolding about Devonshire House was black against the sky. And Air Street had been torn down and Regent Street rebuilt. Not a flagstone, not a brick remained, of that dark alley she had hurried

down so often. And they themselves twenty-five years later, with what left of those earlier selves, with twenty years still ahead of them, what did it count for in their lives that they should have known those few weeks of ecstasy and anguish? Were they everything or were they nothing?

I pondered.

The long, agreeable, uneventful years; those years that represent, we are told, the stuff of life, the getting down to reality, that constitute success; how was one to weigh them against those few enraptured weeks, and what measure is there that can contain them both? What is success in life and what is failure? The long years of service and responsibility: it may be that they are the stuff of life. It may be that poets and novelists are wrong to write of that which occupies only a fraction of a man's conscious life; that dramatists falsify reality when they bring the curtain down on the grand gesture. It may be that what count in life are the reasoned processes of caution and ambition, the steady enterprise that makes for empire and prosperity, for the amenities of social conduct and coöperation, and that to burn with the hard gem-like flame is a less sure passport to immortality. It may be.

I only know that there are times when I picture the Marian and Merrick that have endured the long trial of their exile, their days filled with pleasant and useful duties; occupied with the demands of friends, the claims of hospitality; visiting, receiving, comfort-

ing, and exhorting; leading worthy and serviceable lives, the kind of lives that make for the well ordering of the social scheme. I picture that, and then I think of them as they were, twenty-five years ago, on a gray autumn morning, strained close in each other's arms, with hell and heaven in their hearts. And I compare and wonder, and I ask myself whether anything that has happened since to either of them has mattered in the least.

THE END

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